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The collective voice: the novels of Tchicaya u Tam'si.

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sister. For now he can say to Sophie: "Maintenant que Mère est revenue, te voilà relevée du souci de veiller sur moi: que Dieu te rende au centuple ce que tu m'as donné...." (Phalènes 244) Prosper realises that he has at last reached maturity and that he no longer needs the constant moral support of his sister, who has been a surrogate mother to him. He had often puzzled over the very close, even ambiguous relationship that bound him to Sophie but now he sees quite clearly the way ahead. Without her he would never have become a man but now he is ready to go ahead alone. Les phalènes ends with a striking image:

> Qu'est-ce que l'on fait si la pirogue fait de l'eau au beau milieu de la rivière, là où le courant est violent? On ne se bat pas à vouloir ramener la pirogue à terre, on se jette à l'eau le plus loin possible du courant....(249-50)

Prosper's commitment to sometning beyond himself has required a descent within himself and an understanding of his own personal experience in order to express his social vision. Here it is necessary to pause and consider the question of commitment or *engagement* for, although it is now an old debate, it is an unresolved one which no study of contempory African writing can ignore.[4] The relationship of the individual to the collectivity, which the stories of Prosper and Gaston explore, reflects that of the writer to his or her community.

II

As early as 1932, the review Légitime Défense defended the belief that literature and politics are inextricably interrelated. In 1968 the Cultural Congress of Havana set out to define more precisely the responsibilities and role of the Third World writer. The delegates agreed that literary works from the Third World should express the preoccupations and the aspirations of peoples struggling for their liberation. They should see themselves not as purveyors of truth but as instigators of critical thought, so that the people might be helped to see themselves and their situation in a new light. In post-independent Africa, with the colonial powers no longer providing a unifying focus for resistance, positions have diversified and pan-Africanism has been replaced by a growing sense of national identity. At the same time, a sense of collective responsibility and commitment remains strong among contemporary writers of Africa and in particular, their relationship to the reader remains a question of fundamental concern. They continue to ask themselves for whom exactly they are writing. Do they speak to a black elite? Or to a Western audience? Or should they try to reach the masses who are as yet predominantly illiterate? And if they are to reach a wide audience in Africa, which language should be

used? And who will publish their works? These complex and unresolved questions are as acute today as they were sixty years ago.

Where, it must be asked, is U Tam'Si's narrative situated in this debate? Firstly, it must be seen in the context of Congolese writing, for the history of this Central African region distinguishes it from other parts of Africa. For more than two centuries, the vast kingdom of the Kongo dominated the region and it was one of the most flourishing and best organised kingdoms of Africa. The vision of a reunited Kongo, reinstated to its former splendour, pervaded not only messianic and political movements of the 1950's but is also strongly present in contemporary poetry, prose and theatre. Congolese writers have a keen sense of independence and national identity; their contribution to issues concerning the human race is posited in their being first and foremost Congolese. Most have stated clearly their reservations regarding the Negritude poets' insistance of their "Black" identity to the detriment of distinctive historical, cultural and linguistic features. For his part, U Tam'Si stated: "I have always lived on this side of Negritude."[5] He does not attempt an ideological definition of "the negro". His writing is firmly rooted in "la terre congolaise". In one of his best-known poems, "Natte à tisser" from Feu de brousse, he says:

sale tête de nègre
voici ma tête congolaise
C'est l'écuelle la plus saine.[6]

In an interview, U Tam'Si went further, saying that his "tête de nègre" does not interest him; it is his "tête congolaise" that is important, in as much the cultural as the political sense.[7]

This distinction between "political" and "cultural", or for the purposes of this study, "literary", is an important one. The enthusiasm with which writers such as Frantz Fanon have envisaged Negro-African literature as an arm in the struggle for liberation has tended to emphasise the political combat to the detriment of the poetic combat. These two aspects of commitment are intrinsically linked for it is by discovering within himself "revolutionary" modes of expression that the writer creates a new language, capable of conveying the essence of a particular experiential universe. It is in this way that the African writer affirms both his own identity and that of his people.

The Zaïrean critic, Pius Nagandu Nkashama, expresses the concern that the rich diversity of African literary discourse should not be lost through preoccupation with political efficacy. He maintains that, without rejecting the concept of commitment, one must go beyond the theme of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation to that of "l'angoisse existentielle".[8]

This is precisely the message of U Tam'Si's narrative although he himself strongly denied that he had any message to convey.[9] Yet the story of the Pobard and Poaty families is set in the socio-political realities of pre- and post-independent Congo and Prosper, Judge Poaty, Mathilde and Gaston commit themselves to fighting exploitation and injustice. They are "problematic heroes" in the Lukacian sense of the word, as they search for authentic values in a dislocated world. U Tam'Si gives poetical expression to this form of existential agony in Le Ventre, the collection of poems which trace the suffering and betrayal of Patrice Lumumba:[10]

> Les flamboyants ploient,
> Moi, je vais d'un chant à
> l'autre en tâchant de vivre
> sans mourir suffisamment
> afin de laisser passer l'aube
> s'il doit passer sur mon
> corps. (94)

In U Tam'Si's discourse, a key element in the struggle for social change is the need to understand the individual's relationship to society or to the collective whole in order to understand self. It is a dilemma with which each of the protagonists grapples. Gaston, the last in the chain of "héros problématiques", stands accused for having dared to verbalise the dilemma; for having dared to suggest

that the individual has any loyalty to himself over and above the good of the whole.

> Nous nous appartenons à nous-mêmes avant de 'nous' appartenir. Je veux dire que l'homme s'appartient à soi-même avant d'appartenir à la communauté des hommes. Je veux dire que son appartenance à la communauté est un choix libre. Il doit choisir librement la communauté à laquelle il veut appartenir. Je veux dire que la communauté ..., il n'en est pas l'esclave. Je conclus: cherchons ensemble une liberté de nous moins esclave! (Ces fruits 309-10)

In the revolutionary climate of the mid-sixties, these words are taken as irrefutable evidence of his subversive activities and of his disloyalty to the Party. Ironically, Gaston's criticism of the Party leadership stems from his vision of a society built on justice and integrity, while it is his judges who are guilty of ambition, corruption and exploitation of the people.

In their search for understanding, from Prosper through to Gaston, U Tam'Si's "héros problématiques" increasingly play the role of prophet-political martyr. It is illuminating at this point to take a closer look at his poetry for, in U Tam'Si's discourse, the concept of suffering on behalf of the collective whole is intimately related to the notion of the poet-martyr.

Paradoxically, on a superficial reading of his poetry it would seem as if U Tam'Si, in spite of what

his pseudonym suggests, in fact cuts himself off from his people and refuses to conform to what is implicitly or explicitly expected of the African writer.[11] His dense, highly connotative imagery is not immediately accessible and this lays him open to the accusation of being elitist or even hermetic. Furthermore, the intensely personal voice of his poetry is striking. Yet the first poem of his first collection, Le mauvais sang, warns the reader against too personalised a reading of the poems that follow. It is interesting to note that the style and imagery of this opening poem distinguish it from those that follow immediately after it in the collection. The latter are some of U Tam'Si's first poems and, by comparison to his later poetry, they are conventional in metre and form. The tone is nostalgically lyrical and at times there are unmistakable echoes of Verlaine. For example:

> La pluie avait dansé
> comme un bel ours de verre
> Je bus son vin amer
> Sur les toits bleus mouillés (Mauvais sang 13)

By contrast, the elliptical syntax and complex ideo-images of the first poem link it more closely to his later poetry, particularly the poems in the section entitled "Les crépusculaires". The fact that U Tam'Si chose it to introduce the collection is significant. In these vigorous lines there is no room

for nostalgia nor for the deliberate exploration of the depths of experience and degradation in the manner of Baudelaire This despite the echoes of Les fleurs du mal:

> Pousse ta chanson - Mauvais sang - comment vivre
> l'ordure à fleur de l'âme, être à chair regret
> l'atrocité du sang fleur d'étoile, nargué
> Des serpents dans la nuit sifflaient comme des
> cuivres [t/o]
> (Mauvais sang 11)

"Mauvais sang" does not simply denote the "mal de vivre" of the poet who, misunderstood by his contemporaries, indulges in a somewhat narcissistic soul-searching. It must be read in the context of U Tam'Si's work as a whole, in order to reveal the full dialectic of the complex blood ideo-image. It is the "sang noir" of the "enfant maudit", the "orphaned" child in Paris. But it is also the "sang noir" of the cursed Black race which the child represents. It is the blood of the thousands who have died under foreign domination and during the slave trade. But it is also the blood of brotherhood which unites the peoples of the Kongo, both past and present, for they inherit the blood of the Ancestors. Tragically, this ideal has yet to be realised for the people are divided by internecine and personal rivalries. Blood therefore denotes also treachery and massacre.

Another facet of the blood ideo-image is that of fertility and the regenerative force of the woman.

This introduces the ambiguous image of the mother. The poet speaks of "la mère vénale" who represents not only the mother who abandoned her child but also Africa who laid herself open to violation.[12]

Blood denotes suffering and also the initiatory practices that symbolise the reaching of maturity and understanding. It symbolises sacrifice. It is the "sang rouge" of the martyr who sacrifices himself for his people and it is the "gros sang" of action and revolt: "Je suis l'acier trempé, le feu des races neuves / Dans mon gros sang rouge écument troublants des fleuves." (Mauvais sang 43)

The complexity of the blood image serves to illustrate that the field of reference of the poems stretches far beyond the immediate world of the poet. The poetic "je" may indeed speak of U Tam'Si, trailing his wretched club foot in the cold grey of Paris, betrayed by his mother and betrayor of his compatriots: "Clopin-clopant infernale cadence!" (Mauvais sang 46) But it is far more. A close analysis of U Tam'Si's dialectical ideo-images shows that the poetic "je" represents a distillation of personnel experience by which is crystallised the experience and suffering of a people.[13] A comprehensive survey of U Tam'Si's poetry would not be appropriate here since his novels are of primary concern but another example will be useful to show how, in a poignantly lyrical poem, the subject of the

poem is both personal and collective; it is as much the loved woman as it is Africa.

Le corps

Je grave des cils sur tes lèvres
on les verra de loin
scintillantes du bleu des vagues
ainsi salées de lumière

L'inférieure surtout qui mouille
quand le mot amour passe
le zénith ou les canicules

Mon baiser te refait
l'oeil clair

Tu redeviens racine
Ton corps te ressemble.[14]

Key ideo-images such as *cils*, *vagues*, *salées*, which inform U TamSi's poetry and prose, will be discussed in the following chapter. What is of interest here is the way in which the sensuality of physical love is expressed in terms of African imagery: the salt blue waves of the coastal region, the heat of the midday sun. Yet the poem is not only about a love relationship; it is about finding and giving identity. In both his poetry and his prose, U Tam'Si grapples with the contradictory forces of love, which both liberates and condemns, which creates and destroys. Authentic love represents a total giving of self, both physically and spiritually. It is not to be confused with carnal desire, that poor substitute which makes man deviate from the ideal of

absolute love of the sort that led Lumumba to sacrifice himself for his people.

In "le corps" then, the loved woman represents Africa. The double meaning of the last two lines is clear: for the exile, Africa is the source of spiritual harmony. The "je" of the poem is not only the poet expressing his longing for a fulfilling relationship. It speaks for all those, both in the Congo and in exile, whose lives have been dislocated during centuries of exploitation by corrupt leaders, be they Black or White, and who seek reconciliation with their roots.

When asked to what extent he considered himself to speak for the collectivity, U Tam'Si insisted on the personal nature of his writing:

> Moi, lorsque j'écris, j'essaie de faire comme le paysan. Je ne vais pas à la quête du nègre, je vais à la quête de Tchicaya U Tam'Si. Oh, pas de façon égoïste, non...! Nous essayons de nous libérer de nos phantasmes extérieurs ... et nous [sommes] alors mieux armés pour nous défendre contre l'extérieur. C'est cela mon engagement, littéraire bien sûr; mais c'est aussi le fondement de mon engagement politique.[15]

The question of poetic vision is a complex one, for can the constant interplay between the fictional "I" and the writer be apprehended? Is it possible to quantify the personal and the representative? Tzvetan Todorov introduces a concept that is helpful in this debate, that of the "personnalité poétique."

In discussing the distinction between "discours" and "histoire" he says:

> Celui qui dit **je** dans le roman n'est pas le **je** du discours, autrement dit le sujet de l'énonciation; ce n'est qu'un personnage et le statut de ses paroles (le style direct) leur donne une objectivité maximum, au lieu de les rapprocher du sujet de l'énonciation véritable. Mais il existe un autre **je**, un **je** la plupart du temps invisible, qui se réfère au narrateur, cette "personnalité poétique" que nous saisissons à travers le discours. Il y a donc une dialectique de la personnalité et de l'impersonnalité entre le **je** du narrateur (implicite) et le **il** du personnage (qui peut être un **je** explicite), entre le discours et l'histoire. Tout le problème des "visions" est là: dans le degré de transparence des **ils** impersonnels de l'histoire par rapport au **je** du discours.[16]

When this notion of dialectical view-points or visions is applied to U Tam'Si's writing it becomes clear that his is the work of a deeply committed humanist, whose point of departure is situated beyond that of the strident political statement. For him, writing was a long-term form of combat, a means of action "la plus propre et la moins blessante pour les autres."[17] In a sense, his entire creative work constitutes a search for liberation, the liberation that comes with understanding oneself and the world in which one lives.

III

The path towards understanding that unfolds in U Tam'Si's narrative demands self-sacrifice, and the notion of martyrdom, both political and religious, is an important theme. Again, it will be necessary to approach the novels from the perspective of U Tam'Si's poetry since here the dialectic of the leader-victim is developed around the central figures of the poet, Christ and Patrice Lumumba. This in turn informs the prose.

The poetic vocation is a difficult one; in accepting it the poet, like Christ, commits himself to suffering and spiritual death. Again, it is the first poem of Le mauvais sang which establishes the essential themes:

> Je serai la mouette la morte par déveine
> Un grand gibet levé remise pour les peines
> m'emporte haut et fier en habits festonnés
>
> Pleure le malheur viendra ternir les diamants
> Ton sang te matraque, ô mes coeurs époumonés
> Je suis noir fils solaire à main le chant dément.

The bird is a recurrent image in U Tam'Si's poetry. It is closely associated with the figure of the poet, symbolising his creative inspiration or his poetic soul. Here, however, images of death and pain portray poetry as a form of spiritual and metaphysical combat. By laying himself open to life by

experiencing the full depths of suffering, the poet enacts the profound paradox of life in death.

> j'ai joué avec mon corps
> l'ardent poème de la mort
> j'ai suivi mon fleuve
> vers des houles froides et courantes
> je me suis ouvert au monde
> des algues
> où grouillent des solitudes
> Aux solitudes ouvrez les halliers
> Au soleil
> ouvrez ma chair
> Au sang mûr des révoltes
> le sperme réel par des souffles m'assimile
> aux levures des feuilles et des tornades
> (Feu de brousse 69)

Yet, like Christ, the political leader and the poet are misunderstood by their contemporaries:

> Ils ont craché sur moi, j'étais encore enfant,
> Bras croisés, tête douce, inclinée, bonne,
> atone. [t/o]
> Pour mon ventre charnu, mon oeil criait: aumône!
> J'étais enfant dans mon coeur il y avait du sang
> (Mauvais sang 31)

The ambiguity of the expression "ils ont craché sur moi" is not immediately evident to a non-Congolese reader. In the Kouilou region from where U Tam'Si originates, spitting, or unction by saliva, is a sign of benediction. The poet then, misunderstood and even held in contempt by his contemporaries, is nevertheless called upon to a high, albeit painful, vocation.

In an interview with Roger Godard, U Tam'Si said: "J'aimerais n'avoir pas honte d'être économe de mon sang. Toute ma poésie a ce sens-là."[18] His acceptance of the combat is symbolised in the title of his sixth collection of poetry, L'arc musical.[19] The *arc musical* is a traditional instrument played by placing one end of the bow in the mouth and making the string vibrate against the teeth. The mouth acts as a sort of echo chamber and gives resonance to the music. The image of a musical bow incorporates the notions of music and battle. Moreover, the warrior's external combat echoes within, for the musician's body and blood vibrate with the music. At the same time the traditional musical instrument signifies the poet's place in the chain of existence, that links the present with the past. The song is both his commitment and his testament:

> Et si cet arc ne me suivait
> là où sont les mânes
> Ceci est mon testament:
> je vous lègue le feu et le chant.
> (Arc musical 166)

Many years earlier, in Le mauvais sang, he had said: "je chante pour n'être pas vaincu à la fin."(28)

The poet sacrifices himself in an ontological sense. In U Tam'Si's poetry, there are constant allusions to sacrificial blood denoting the rituals whereby the living commune with the spirits of the

dead. The spilling of blood is an act of purificiation and reconciliation and at the same time it signifies renewal. For blood is a life force. It is the concrete manifestation of the mystical cycle of life and death.

The concept of martyrdom in U Tam'Si's writing is profoundly ambiguous. This is illustrated in the dialectical treatment of the Christ figure, an ideo-image that will be analysed in detail in the following chapter. Of relevance here is the notion that self-sacrifice should be active, not passive; it is not a submissive giving of self, which represents a form of suicide.[20] Christ was innocent and he should not have allowed himself to be killed: "il est mal de porter une couronne d'épines même pour innocenter un peuple innocent." (Mauvais sang 47)

At the same time, Christ's passion symbolises the history of the Black man. In the poem "Le corbillard", U Tam'Si brings together in a rich synthesis the multiple themes of suffering and sacrifice which have been developed in the preceding poems. The orphan in the poem represents both the poet and Africa, cut off from its Ancestors; it is Lumumba, rejected by his people; it is Christ betrayed by the Jewish people. And yet the apparent futility of death holds out a vision of hope and liberation.

> 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
cet orphelin délire ainsi depuis des siècles
(A triche-coeur 133)

It is one's belief in an ideal and the willingness to commit oneself to it that gives meaning to life. The following lines from U Tam'Si's last published collection of poetry, La veste d'intérieur, make a fitting conclusion to the discussion of poetic, and by extension artistic, commitment:

On dit que son histoire commence
avec le premier chant d'oiseau
qu'il contrefit pour colorier sa voix
qui était une épave de météore (73)

Just as the referential world of U Tam'Si's poetry transcends the particular and the personal, so too in the novels the political involvement of the protagonists has a spiritual dimension which reaches beyond the confines of a specific period in the history of the Congo. Events in the physical world are perceived intuitively or understood in terms of their supranatural significance.[21] This interpenetration of the material and the spiritual worlds manifests itelf through prophetic figures, or sibylline utterances made by characters such as

Sophie, who observe and interpret in their own way the world around them.

Again, an historical perspective is important: prophetic or messianic figures have played a dominant role in the history of the Congo from the time of Béatrice du Kongo and they have contributed to the shaping of the political consciousness of the Congolese people, for whom the concept of the "Saviour" has strong links with the past.[22]

In Les méduses a strangely prophetic preacher plays a significant role. It is this preacher who brings about the meeting on the beach of Elenga, Muendu and Luambu. He is surrounded by a mocking crowd but his ominous predictions seem to be addressed directly to Luambu. Elenga considers him to be a madman and Muendu dismisses him as a prophet from one of the sects that abound in and around the town. But Luambu is fascinated by the man's words which seem to carry a message for him. The preacher's association with the sea and the *méduses* signals from the start that he is of more than passing importance in the narrative.

Luambu, however, is not a political leader; his role, and the place occupied by Les méduses in the epic tale as a whole, will be considered in the context of the metaphysical dimension of the narrative. It is Prosper, and later Gaston and Judge Poaty, who represent the political martyr.

The parallels to be drawn between Prosper and Patrice Lumumba are numerous. Lumumba's historical role and U Tam'Si's own association with him, are important contextual factors here.[23]

Again, the prose cannot be read in isolation from the poetry, where the figure of Lumumba develops into a dominant ideo-image. U Tam'Si was particularly marked by the manner in which Lumumba was betrayed by his own people and he portrays him as a Christ figure.

Va
Va va
au golgotha
le ventre nu devant!
J'ai déjè la bouche sucrée
de tous les mots d'amour
qui vont pleuvoir de ta peine ntre 51)

The agony experienced by a leader who is not understood by the people is expressed in the following lines of profound and controlled emotion. They come from A triche-coeur, a collection of poems first published in 1960. They would have been written before the death of Lumumba, during the period when U Tam'Si was writing Les cancrelats. This illustrates how the theme of the suffering leader pervades his writing, from his early poetry and prose through to Ces fruits si doux, his last published work.

les poings levés en jungle
[illegible]nt une musique
sur un fleuve j'encrai dans le corps de ton âme
chantant ton âme et corps en vain

au col des corbeaux noirs je lus ma joie manquée
un éclair écorcha l'écorce crue d'un arbre
dont on gaula les fruits en vain
un aigle ivre laissa chanter le rossignol
qu'il dépouille depuis en vain
depuis tout seul se meurt l'orphelin mon complice
dévotement l'orage
le dépouille de son âme
en vain
face à la jungle rouge
des feux couleur de sang
(A triche-coeur 135)

Like Patrice Lumumba, Prosper knows the solitude of the leader who is isolated from the unconscious masses. Like Lumumba he is an *évolué* who cannot identify easily with the misery of the poor and the ignorant. And like Lumumba he is betrayed.

The theme of betrayal predominates in this novel: on the level of human relations, Prosper betrays Juliette while Jeanne "la perle de Kin" and Paul Vincent betray Pambault. In his turn, maddened with envy, Pambault betrays Prosper. He steals the Party membership cards and places them on the victims of the "hommes-panthère" in this way implicating Prosper. Prosper's friends and comrades are lacking in trust and allow themselves to be persuaded of Prosper's guilt. Like Lumumba, who was victim of the machinations of the Belgian Administration, Prosper is betrayed by the French. In order to ensure the downfall of the Communist Party, Pambault and many others are enrolled as informers. On the official level, a close friend and confident of Félix Eboué, who was then the President of the RDA, is sent from

France to Brazzaville in order to give support to the moderate party of Abbé Lokou, at the expense of the PCC. Furthermore, the Catholic Church is equally implicated in this boiling pot of deception and intrigue.

It is Sophie who understands intuitively the sacrificial role that Prosper will play. She recognises "l'énorme sacrifice pour racheter les fautes d'un peuple toujours ingrat, toujours prêt à prendre fait et cause pour de fausses idoles et des prêcheurs en eau trouble." (Phalènes 56) It is Sophie, more than a mother to Prosper, who provides him with constant spiritual and moral support. Without her, Prosper is lost for it is she alone "qui sait démêler les fils de sa vie quand ils s'embrouillent." (Phalènes 448) Sophie is a complex and ambiguous figure in the narrative. She takes on an increasingly prophetic role in Les phalènes, where she returns to the faith of her childhood and becomes profoundly devout. She is considered to be a "sainte femme" and when she "miraculously" cures a child of an epileptic fit, the crowds of Poto-Poto are convinced of her supernatural powers. Be that as it may, she observes silently the activities of her brother and she expresses her premonitions in sibylline observations. She takes no part in the political discussions which absorb Prosper but she understands instinctively that she is in some way being used by

Abbé Lokou and his supporters to create a trap for her brother:

> Et toi, on veut te prendre au piège, on veut atteindre quelqu'un de plus important que toi, mais sur son chemin, tu est le plus gros obstacle. Judas, on n'a jamais su où il est passé. Il se manifeste plus facilement que notre Sauveur. (Phalènes 220)

Here the parallel between Christ the religious martyr and Prosper is made explicit.

In Ces fruits si doux, the last part of the tetralogy, Judge Poaty too is portrayed as a political martyr. In his case, his prophetic role is recognised by the people whom he defends against the corruption of the politicians:

> Le peuple ne se trompe jamais, il donne le nom de 'prophète' à l'homme de la Providence qui parle à son coeur et réveille sa foi en lui-même. Il traite de politicien le fourbe qui n'a de caresses que pour l'endormir, et l'endormir pour mieux l'affamer! (Ces fruits si doux 143-44)

When the Judge is abducted, the people take to the streets. They demand the resignation of l'Abbé Lokou, "l'autocrate en soutane", and the return of their "sauveur". Poaty's body is never found and his wife Mathilde refuses to believe he is dead. Years later she awaits his return in the same way that today some people in the Congo await the return of Matsoua,

the political leader and prophet whose body was buried secretly without any of the usual public ritual.

Gaston, Judge Poaty's son, represents most clearly the sacrificial martyr. With his story the metaphysical element in the novel becomes increasingly evident and in the last section of Ces fruits si doux, the reader is plunged into a hallucinatory world, fittingly prefaced by a text taken from the Apocalypse of St John. Here Gaston's quest for identity takes the form of the initiatory path, inextricably intertwined with Christ's Passion.

IV

The initiatory path is a recurrent metaphor of both thematic and structural importance to the narrative. Each of the major protagonists undertakes a journey that marks a turning point along the way to understanding and adulthood. The physical pain that they endure reflects their spiritual suffering. The language and imagery of these passages is reminiscent of initiation ritual, where the elements of fire and water have esoteric significance. Therefore, before taking up the subject of Gaston's martyrdom, it is worth considering the initiatory journey made by those characters who precede him in the narrative.

The first of these is Prosper who, in Les cancrelats, journeys across the plain of Ntandu Pundji

as a prisoner of the militia. The sun beats down mercilessly, indifferent to the human suffering. It is a small river that saves Prosper: the militia stop to swim in the clear water and the driver of the lorry, Luambu, drives off with Prosper, leaving the naked militia to fulminate helplessly in the burning dust of the road.

This humorous scene is followed immediately by a description of Prosper brooding over the ontological significance of his own reactions during the drama at the *Factorerie*. He tries to understand why he had not defended himself against the false accusations of theft and it seems to him as if his very soul had been stolen from him. He is ashamed of his passivity and this insight into himself is more painful to him than the physical abuse that he has suffered. It is worth quoting the passage at some length since it illustrates well the enigmatic language that characterises the initiatory-like journeys undertaken by the protagonists:

> Abasourdi par cette accusation de vol, Prosper fut rejeté en lui-même, nullement épouvanté, résigné à ne pas fuir ça. Sans amertume ou à peine, il s'était laissé couler à fond, dans le coin le plus à l'ombre de son âme. Il en avait une, oui; toute une aubaine son âme! C'était d'abord une boule dure à avaler qui menaçait de lui rompre la gorge. C'était une chambre noire, il y faisait frais, frisquet et mauve avec des soleils blêmes partout. Par moments, tout y était rouge, avec des soleils bleus, orange, (sic) verts... Son âme comme un kaléidoscope qui rendait une rose pour une goutte de sang dans ses yeux blessés. Un soleil pour un brin de paille!

> Son âme comme une eau qu'il n'osait boire. Soundainement redécouverte, il n'en avait plus peur. Il l'avait voilà tout, avec trop de lumière qui ne lui montrait plus rien. Sur tout cet univers s'étalait le silence que ne trouait pas le chant aigu des cigales. Comme trop d'obscurité, trop de lumière nuit à l'intelligence, au discernement. C'est dans ces moments-là qu'on pose l'acte de foi. Ah si devant la Factorerie, il y avait eu, en plus de celle de sa soeur, une protestation! Il saurait discerner. Trop de lumière survolte une âme, la rend dérisoire au corps. Et à ce corps, Sophie avait demandé: "Défends-toi!" Il se peut que le corps pour se venger, ait volé. Pour se venger de l'âme. Simple supposition. Il faut plutôt dire que trop de lumière détache une âme des chose (sic) d'ici-bas. De là, comment s'étonner du silence de Prosper? Avouer ou nier le vol dont on l'accusait était certainement vain, inutile. (Cancrelats 127-28)

Prosper is preoccupied by his thoughts and scarcely replies to the loquacious lorry driver. However, when the latter enumerates his various names, they seem to have an occult significance for Prosper: the driver calls himself "Lufua-I mbu" meaning "death-song"; his father called him "Nyoma" meaning "drum" and his mother called him "Tchititthi" meaning "grass". For Prosper:

> ces noms dans son âme toute neuve et toute sensible contaient chacun une étrange histoire. Il voyait un nombre infini d'hommes, tous semblables au chauffeur qui frappait - un chant mort à la bouche ou un chant de mort à la bouche - qui frappait sur un tam-tam sourd. Un brin d'herbe verte devenue une vaste savane que consumait un soleil or et là-dessus planait le chant ironique de la mort, dans un tourbillon de cendre.... (Cancrelats 129)

Later, as they bounce along in the hot lorry Prosper falls asleep. He dreams vividly of his sister Sophie digging a grave while she and the neighbours sing a traditional song of death.

Clearly, Prosper's physical ordeal has a profoundly spiritual and metaphysical dimension. The mystical relationship of the body and soul, and the existence of death in life, are expressed by means of the ritualistic elements of sun, light and dark, water, grass, music and drums. Just as initiation requires that the initiates be removed for a period from normal society, Prosper is taken away from his sister and familiar surroundings. He is suspended in time and space, travelling across a plain that has few landmarks. This journey provides the opportunity for him to meditate, with little or no interruption, on the meaning of events and his own actions: it is the physically painful experience which forces him to make this assessment.

The lorry driver, Lufu-Lumba, reappears in Les méduses as Luambu, the main character. Here the strangely coincidental death of both his friends makes him the victim of the superstitious and irrational imaginings of the people of Pointe-Noire. Luambu is deeply affected by the death of Elenga and Muendo and this reinforces his obsessive feelings of guilt for the death of his wife and child. Overwhelmed at the news of his friends' death, he walks out of the office

where he works and sets off along the road to Massabi. In the popular mind, this is a road that one should ever take at night, especially with the full moon. Luambu enters a nightmarish world filled by strange women, laughter, creatures that crawl, suck, stick and moan. It is a labyrinth of marshes and rivers, lit by the moon and spasmodic flames.

> C'est le pays d'un autre temps qui appartient à ceux qui ne sont plus, qui l'habitent en faisant fi de leur coeur de naguère! Ne le fréquentent que ceux qui n'ont pas le corps alourdi d'un poids de chair et d'os inutiles. (Méduses 230-31)

Terrified, he stumbles on until a thick mist slowly engulfs him. Through it he seems to see a strange vessel which must surely carry Julienne, his drowned wife. The hallucinatory images recreate the esoteric language of a trance experience.

> L'incendie fut subit qui embrasa tout avec des bruits de friture, la lune et l'embarcation semblèrent un moment échapper à ce brasier. Quand les premières flammes atteignirent la lune en plein visage, il s'éleva de l'embarcation de si terribles hurlements que toute la gent bayracienne qui avait paru droguée, plongée dans une éternelle léthargie s'éveilla avec des clameurs lugubres. Le ciel s'assombrit à la mesure que la lune se consumait tout entière avec la résignation d'une femme salamandre qu'on offre en holocauste aux flammes d'un feu d'ordalie. (Méduses 234)

That Luambu has entered into a trance is clear. Interestingly, he is referred to here as Lufwa Lumba,

by the name he had given himself meaning "death-song". When he awakens from his trance he no longer understands why he had set off to Massabi, his family village. Had the only reason for the journey been to witness this spectacle offered by the moon "en délire incendiant jusqu'au sang, jusqu'aux os un homme dont la joie est généreuse? Vers qui tendre la main, maintenant, s'il ne peut plus rien?" (Méduses 235)

Again the elements of fire, water and blood predominate. Luambu's journey is a spiritual experience, where he descends into the depths of his guilt and fear, hovering on the borders of madness. When he emerges he is a changed person. He seems to have moved into another world, detached from those around him. He seems to have found a purpose, a mysterious "rendez-vous avec la vie." Yet the next day, just when he seems to have reached his destination, he falls into a coma from which it is uncertain whether he ever emerges.

The ritualistic language and symbolism which characterise the initiatory rites of passage undertaken by Prosper and Luambu contrast with the description of Sophie's journey. Here the language is more reminiscent of the Christian Way of the Cross. It is at the height of Prosper's political and personal difficulties that Sophie disappears, throwing him and the rest of the family into a state of

confusion. Eventually it is a *marabou* consulted by Juliette, who "sees" what has happened:

> une route qui serpente à travers la brousse, une femme s'y traîne à genoux, elle rampe sur le ventre tantôt, puis elle boite plus qu'elle ne marche vers une grande église de pierre. C'est un grand rendez-vous. Il ne faut rien craindre. Elle ne souffre pas du mal qu'elle a. (Phalènes 127)

In fact Sophie has gone to Linzolo, many kilometres away. Although she claims to have no idea what took her there, it was clearly an act of penitance. She arrived bruised and bleeding. She began praying and the next day she was completely healed but unconscious.

This time the trance-like element is expressed in the language and imagery of the Christian church. Sophie, who is in some way Prosper's spiritual guardian, goes off on a spiritual journey of penance on behalf of Prosper. Her absence is misconstrued by the superstitious rumour-mongerers of Poto-Poto, thereby adding to Prosper's difficulties. Yet he is forced to face up to his detractors on his own and in doing so, he takes another step towards becoming independent of Sophie. It is as if he has gone through another stage of spiritual growth, this time through the suffering of his sister.

Before turning to the profoundly metaphysical "Way of the Cross" undertaken by Gaston in Ces fruits

si doux, it is important to consider the initiatory journey in terms of both traditional African and Christian belief. Here is another dimension to the notion of two worlds that interrelate and inform each other.

Traditionally, in African societies the initiation rite was of both personal and collective significance. It was a means of conserving and passing on knowledge and of maintaining social order. The individual underwent the process on behalf of the group to which he belonged. Furthermore, the ritual was an act of communion with the Ancestors, a reaffirmation of the rapport between the world of the living and that of the departed. Honorat Aguessy explains initiation as an act of communication:

> Pendant son initiation, l'homme apprend à communier avec l'univers, les ancêtres, les membres du groupe auquel il appartient. Dans ce cadre d'ouverture aux différents aspects de la totalité, l'hospitalité (valeur sociale prépondérante) souligne la disponibilité permanente pour autrui et l'accueil des valeurs de l'autre. L'ethos qui l'exprime, amène chaque élément de l'ensemble à se conduire dans le respect de l'autre et de la vie ordonnée. Ainsi, sur le plan social, le concept religion prend une acception forte dans la mesure où tous les membres de la communauté sont liés par une trame de principes, de pratiques, de rôles et de statuts très dynamique où personne n'est ni inutile, ni superflu.[24]

This notion of shared existence or brotherhood is an important one for U Tam'Si's narrative where, as has been seen, a sense of political commitment stems

essentially from a value system which has humanity at its centre.

The initiatory path is also a process of individual learning and development. It is an important stage in the slow transformation of the individual as he both develops his spiritual life and becomes increasingly conscious of his humanity; it is a step in the "progressive passage from exteriority to interiority."[25] Fundamental to all initiatory practices would seem to be the fact that they have to do with "l'ordre qualitatif et non quantitatif dans la mesure où il s'agit d'apprendre à bien vivre et non de capitaliser des connaissances." (Aguessy 139)

Learning to endure physical pain is one of the most important aspects of initiation, for it teaches mastery of self which in turn leads to self-understanding. This too is signifcant for U Tam'Si's creative writing. It illuminates the theme of suffering which informs both his poetry and prose.

Physical and spiritual suffering are not seen as a negative experience nor a reason for self-pity. Suffering is accepted as an essential part of life and spiritual growth: "il faut souffrir pour être un homme comme il faut ..." (Mauvais sang 47) Physical pain is endured uncomplainingly: Sophie's legs trouble her, Juliette has a long and serious illness. For his part, Prosper suffers mental anguish made worse because he recognises his "illness":

> Prosper se savait malade et pis encore; les autres, Félicien Luembard lui-même, étaient plus malades, parce qu'ils ne se savaient pas malades. Une vie où l'on ne prend aucune décision est une mauvaise vie. Et quand on n'est pas une main, quand on n'a pas de main, on est infirme. Est-ce qu'on se guérit d'une infirmité? Et contre qui s'appuyer en attendant la mort? (Cancrelats 277-78)

Of all the protagonists, Gaston endures the greatest physical and spiritual suffering. He is beaten and tortured to the point of death and the reader is taken into the deepest recesses of his mind where, in a semiconscious state, he experiences pain in vivid, hallucinatory images. His agony is portrayed in escteric language of poetic beauty, by which the physical suffering is mediated to become a spiritual experience. The imagery is inspired from nature: his skin is likened to the bark of a tree that is peeling off in places, he has a vicious hedgehog in his throat, fire in his stomach, his sap has dried up. The man loses his human, corporal identity to become absorbed into the greater universe of natural forces. A single passage quoted at some length illustrates the power of U Tam'Si's prose:

> L'air n'est ni acide ni exagérément salé. L'écorce ne tenait plus, tombait en lambeaux, par places, tellement racornie. Un hérisson vicieux trônait au centre du larynx. C'est le moment de ne rien déglutir. J'ai le feu au ventre. L'écorce en lambeaux. Plus de sève, plus d'eau. Plus de salive non plus. L'aridité d'un Sahel chaud dans la gorge. La luette s'enflamme au moment de déglutir le soufre et l'ammoniaque. Ses trompes d'Eustache prennent les dimensions

> d'une bouche d'égout béante. Des rats couinent une vindicte. Tout ce qui s'y engouffre est visqueux, nauséeux, nauséabond, semble une macération d'herbe, de cendre, de chair purulent. Jamais des mots sortis de la bouche d'homme n'ont paru rats, pieuvres, hyènes dans une tête devenue cul-de-basse-fosse ou fondement étranglé d'un gros intestin de diarrhéique ... (Ces fruits si doux 318)

Gaston had continued with Judge Poaty's work and, as the son of the spiritual father of the Mouvement National de la Révolution, he was taken onto the Central Committee. His role of political martyr soon becomes evident. Paulin, devoured by personal jealousy, ferments opinion against him, aided by Gaston's own incautious and often paradoxical speeches. As the climate of mistrust and suspicion grows Mathilde, Gaston's wife, senses an imminent catastrophe. With a sense of deep foreboding she looks at Gaston:

> L'effondrement de son regard était pitoyable. Il osait, il se résignait au suicide sacrificiel. La bête se laisse coucher sur l'autel des sacrifices et son cri est à la fois plainte et prière. A la fois révolte et soumission. Sa lassitude est trop grande et l'espoir de l'emporter est plus mince. Il répéta: 'Malheur au pasteur de néant qui abandonne ses brebis!' Sa voix était pierre, sa voix était blessure. Elle saignait avec orgueil. Elle saignait avec générosité. Il appelait la foudre sur sa seule tête. Et il se damnait dans la peau noire du pasteur de néant et dans la robe de détresse de la brebis abandonnée...Car il sait quelle part de responsabilité lui revient dans ce jeu de massacre dont c'est seulement le prélude. (Ces fruits si doux 236)

The image of the sacrificial lamb recalls both pagan ritual and the teaching of Christ. This parallel between Gaston and Christ is progressively developed. Earlier, Gaston's casual reference to the fact that it would be Easter the following Sunday is without apparent significance. Mathilde briefly meditates upon the events of that first Easter and the betrayal of the Son of Man by false priests but she quickly returns to the reality of their busy programme for the day. In fact, Gaston is to meet an important Angolan representative of the M.P.L.A. and is to discover the extent of his own danger in the complex web of political intrigue that is closing around him. Gaston himself sees the similarity between his own situation and that of Patrice Lumumba:

> Regarde ce qui est arrivé avec Lumumba, ce sont les Congolais qui se sont chargés d'avoir son sang sur la conscience, avec la complicité des Africains à qui l'on a fait croire qu'il était bon qu'on l'élimine. (Ces fruits si doux 234)

Easter Sunday is to be the last meal that Gaston shares with his family. He accompanies his mother Mathilde to church and she returns clutching in one hand a palm cross which she refuses to put down. It is that night that Gaston is arrested. His arrest is announced in two lines, significantly set apart on the page, the last lines of the third section of the novel:

> Gaston fut arrêté dans la nuit du mercredi au jeudi de Pâques. (251)

And so begins the calvary of Gaston, a modern-day Christ figure.[26] He is thrown into prison, beaten, "tried" and apparently dies; the parallel between this and the first Easter is reinforced in the prose, which echoes the simple and unemotional language in which the story of Christ's Passion is recounted in the Bible.

Images of Gaston's trial are projected through his feverish mind. It seems to him as if he has been put in a hot house and is being tortured by a maniac gardener with a pair of secateurs and a rake with strangely sharpened teeth. The interrogation by the gardener/judge and Gaston's replies are again reminiscent of words spoken by Pontius Pilate and Christ: "Je ne vois aucune faute en lui" and "Vous l'avez dit."

Repeated reference to four nails is woven into the text, so that they become a significant ideo-image, denoting the Crucifixion and also the torturing of Gaston. The insistant "Pan! Pan! Pan!" as they are hammered into his limbs punctuates the text with a grim rhythmn.

A further striking parallel is that between the two Mathildes, Gaston's wife and his mother, and the two Mary's of the Bible. In his delirium it seems to Gaston that his mother came to him in prison:

> Ma mère est venue, elle pleurait. Elle tendait ses mains pour me caresser les lèvres avec un peu d'esprit-de-vin. Ça sentait aigre. Je lui ai dit, je m'en souviens: 'Femme, ne fais pas un tel geste et cesse tes larmes. Je ne veux pas savoir si tes caresses ont vieilli. Retourne à ton ventre. J'aurai besoin d'une fumigation de tout le corps si je parviens à sortir des griffes de cet ogre'. (Ces fruits si doux 307)

The echoing of Christ's words from the cross is unmistakable, while the image of the stomach, a recurrent ideo-image in U Tam'Si's writing, introduces another metaphysical dimension of life and death.

Mathilde visits the prison where Gaston is incarcerated. The account is strangely reminiscent of Peter's story, when he waited outside in the courtyard while Christ was being judged. Mathilde is told to mingle with those who are waiting outside the prison. She is to approach the guard, who will be sitting around a fire near the frangipani tree. She is to give him something and ask him to give it to her husband so that he will die in peace without feeling the bullets. Mathilde finds everything as predicted. Twice, the people waiting around the fires ask her if she is the wife of the man who is going to be executed at dawn, and twice she denies it. Unlike Peter she is spared the third denial, for an owl hoots and creates a diversion.

> Elle se rasséréna en pensant qu'on ne lui poserait pas une troisième fois la même question, qu'elle n'aurait pas à répondre du blâme de reniement, certaine qu'un coq ne chanterait pas

> après une chouette, puisque, après tout, la nuit n'était pas encore parvenue à la veille que chante le premier coq. (Ces fruits si doux 267)

The sequence of events regarding Gaston's arrest and death are difficult to unravel for they are perceived through the dazed consciousness of Mathilde and her mother-in-law. The superstitious imaginings of the people add to the confusion, as do the unconfirmed suspicions of Babotoli, the vicious Chief of Security. Reduced to the basic facts, it would seem that the two Mathilde's are permitted to take Gaston's body away from the prison, the official version being that he had committed suicide. Friends come to the house to pay their last respects before a coffin, that is completely hidden by a spectacular array of flowers such as no florist in Brazzaville could provide. Later, his tomb is desecrated, probably by Babotoli's men, and is found to be empty. Babotoli is convinced that he has been tricked and that Gaston has escaped.

Certainly, plausible explanations can be found for such a version: the package given to the guard by Mathilde was some sort of sleeping drug that sent Gaston off into a simulated death state; he thus escaped being executed since the superstitious beliefs of the firing squad would have led them to refuse to fire on a "dead" body; the authorities would have had no choice but to invent the story of suicide and to

hand over the body. Significantly, the stranger who helped Mathilde to prepare the body also put ointment on Gaston's wounds and chose to clothe him in loose-fitting garments, the colour of dead grass. He then dirtied these clothes with red, black and yellow soil that he had in his pockets. Only then was the body wrapped in a shroud, which was not fastened. All this would seem to point to a planned escape.

It is inferred that a similarly plausible explanation may be suggested for Christ's disappearance from the tomb:

> Toutes les apparences de mort clinique ne sont pas fiables. Il y a des tas de gens qu'on a enterrés vivants. Qui sont morts d'avoir été enterrés si profondément. Souvenez-vous, on ne brisa pas les jambes au Christ. Ce qui est sûr, c'est qu'avec des jambes brisées il n'aurait jamais eu la force de rouler la pierre de sa tombe et de s'en aller dans le monde à la barbe des soldats romains. Ils s'étaient endormis ivres d'avoir fêté la capture et le supplice de l'Innocent! (Ces fruits si doux 281-82)

By focussing on physical realities, U Tam'Si calls into question the divine or miraculous element surrounding Christ's resurrection, just as in his poetry U Tam'Si frequently desacrilises Christ. He portrays Christ, often with biting irony, as a human figure and he points to the ambiguity of Christ's death. In the narrative it is interesting that the authorities should have chosen to put out the story of Gaston's suicide, for it recalls how in his poetry,

U Tam'Si interprets equivocally the meaning of Christ's death. In one sense it was suicide and a betrayal: Christ should have resisted because he was innocent.

> Je suis le pollué, le cocu de l'Histoire, ma morte étoile du Bénin, ma prise de sang, mais à quand la greffe du cervelas? Celle du cerveau déjà insidieuse ... Par temps d'inquisition quel Christ n'est pas un Judas? (Notes de veille 97)

At the same time, the martyr's death is a form of revolt against the oppressor. In an interview with Marc Rombaut, U Tam'Si remarked that he saw in Christ "le plus illustre des colonisés."[27] By calling upon the people to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" Christ was calling upon them to revolt against Caïphas and all those who accepted submissively the rule of the occupying forces as long s their own priviledges were ensured.

The desacrilisation of Christ serves to call into question the role of the Christian church in Africa. In Ces fruits si doux, in the midst of Gaston's feverish ramblings, an indictment of Christianity interposes between images of the Crucifixion:

> Pan! Pan! Pan! (Il manque un clou.) Silence! Silence! Silence!
>
> Enfoncer des clous sans faire du bruit. Il rêve ou quoi? Qu'est-ce qu'il va faire du quatrième? Un fer de lance? On n'est plus là. Deux millénaires de foi chrétienne nous ont donné le bazooka et la bombe thermo-nucléaire et encore,

> je ne suis pas au courant des derniers progrès de la science.... On est loin de la barbarie du bout de fer de lance. (314)

In the case of Gaston's death however, the mysterious or supranatural element predominates and little importance is placed on a plausible explanation of events surrounding his escape.

The enigmatic stranger with a balding forehead plays a key role: he appears and disappears mysteriously, issues strange instructions and seems to have visionary powers. Both Mathilde the wife, and Mathilde the mother, accept unquestioningly his presence and authority, obeying him as if in a trance. It is he who carries Gaston's body back to the house as if it were as light as a wisp of straw. Passers-by do not seem to see them. In this fictional universe, it is impossible to distinguish the real from the unreal, the everyday world of flesh and blood from the world of supranatural forces. Mathilde, Gaston's mother, twice asks herself the question: "Dans quel monde sommes-nous?" Who are the shadows and who are real?

> Les embarras du quotidien ont toujours fait partie de la fiction de la farce que nous nous jetons au visage. Nous remuons la poussière. Si le quotidien est une fiction, la vraie vie est ailleurs. Mais où? (277)

To people around them, the two Mathildes appear to have been transformed into zombies. They do not question Gaston's death; in fact, they seem to have lost their reasoning faculties. And yet, by what rational criteria can the full meaning of Gaston's "death" be understood? It is the spiritual significance of his martyrdom that is important. This is made clear by the quotation from the Apocalypse of Saint Jean placed in exergue at the beginning of this last section which, significantly, is entitled "Le fou et la mort".[28]

Gaston and Christ are the sacrificial lamb whose death represents that of thousands of innocents. In terms of the rational world such a death is judged to be madness. Yet Gaston's experience is clearly a spiritual death that is necessary for growth and for renewal, a prerequisite for the birth of the new man. It is the inexplicable mystery of life and death that is emphasised and the reality of the physical world is called into question.

A closer look at the language and imagery of the last section of the narrative will make evident the metaphor of the initiatory path. Gaston's delirium is more than feverish raving. It resembles a metaphysical meditation expressed in the language of ritual. He perceives his existence in terms of the natural world: the earth, the hills, water. His physical being is diffused, diluted; he has no shadow,

he leaves no trace behind him. He has the impression of awakening to consciousness in an inter-uterine space.

> A propos de ma vie intra-utérine, ma mémoire est à la fois loquace et laconique. D'immenses soleils et moi dans moi et moi souvent dans un de ces soleils qui est une ville de lumière, dorée avec une rue où j'avance vers un but indéfini plus gigantesque que ce qui peut s'imaginer, aussi peu certain que cette atmosphère opaline. (301)

In this trance-like state, Gaston tries to solve the enigma of where he is going and why. He is following a path that is not a path, a path which his feet create and make disappear as he advances. Recurrent gnomic phrases reinforce the element of ritual: for example, "Ma mère est au pied du mur qui s'effondre," repeated three times; or, "L'âme va souffrir."

The interweaving of Animistic and Christian concepts of sacrifice and suffering is significant, for it expresses the dialectical tension that these two world visions represent. Martial Sinda focusses on an important feature that distinguishes Christian from traditional African religions, when he examines the influence of the Christian model on Kimbanguism.

Whereas sacrifice was traditionally a collective act, designed to maintain a social order, Christian ritual and prayer represent an essentially personal commitment. The Christian worshipper is responsible

towards himself, he is ultimately alone. This is important for understanding Gaston's martyrdom or initiatory path since, in addition to the Christ-like dimension of sacrificial death, there is the equally strong element of personal cleansing and expiation of an unconfessed sin.

Already before his arrest, Gaston recognises that Paulin's hatred for him dates from the death of his sister, Marie-Thérèse.

> Curieux, c'est comme si dans la vie, il y a toujours le temps d'avant le péché (celui du paradis) et celui d'après le péché (celui du paradis perdu). Car il y a eu péché. Un péché non confessé. (196)

Gaston's incestuous relationship with Marie-Thérèse and her death from an abortion are only hinted at. At the same time, the legend recounted by Mouissou, which interweaves and mirrors the narrative, tells of the incestuous relationship between Mavoungou and Ngondi. From their love was born a child which they killed but which returned to haunt them with his song. And so Gaston's suffering along the initiatory path will be a means of paying retribution; it represents a process of purification.

The physical and spiritual dimensions of his journey are difficult to disentangle since references to the physical landscape are intertwined with the images of pain expressed in terms of natural imagery.

This two-fold dimension is crystallised in the *tchilolo* bush, an ideo-image which plays an important structuralising role in the narrative.

The *tchilolo* opens and closes the novel; it is a bush that grows plentifully around the Poaty family village and is the emblem of the Poaty clan. It is therefore not coincidental that Judge Poaty uses it as a nickname for his daughter Marie-Thérèse. The *tchilolo* is a hardy little plant and as such, it is held to symbolise the spiritual qualities of patience, discretion, endurance and modesty. These are qualities that are taught during initiation and which are aspired after throughout life's journey. The *tchilolo*'s symbolic value is reinforced yet further by the fact that its fruit fed the caravans of slaves on their way to the sea, where the ships waited to take them to America. In this way it is associated with suffering and exploitation.

The ideo-image of the *tchilolo* draws together the threads that constitute the essential meaning of Gaston's initiatory journey. Being the nickname of Marie-Thérèse, the *tchilolo* embodies the incestuous love which Gaston had for his sister and which must be expiated. It connotes the ancestral roots of the Poaty family and also the path that leads back to the ancestral home. The *tchilolo* bush represents both the way and the destination: as Gaston is condemned to death, he feels a sense of deliverance and he

perceives the kingdom of his childhood, where the savanna is dotted with clumps of *tchilolo* bushes. Later, nearing the end of his path, when he is within earshot of Tchilungu, his family village where Mouissou is recounting the legend of Mavoungou and Ngondi, he recognises the *tchilolo* bush and he struggles to remember why it is important for him. He has arrived both physically and spiritually.

Tchilungu, the name of the family village is equally significant here. Earlier in the narrative Judge Poaty had explained to his young colleague, Isidore, that Tchilungu means "guardian". Traditionally it was believed that the sacred powers of the kings of Loango came from this place and returned there after the death of the king. In the occult sense *tchilungu* means "sanctuary" and in terms of military and civil security it signifies "observatory". Gaston has returned to the spiritual sanctuary of his ancestral home and furthermore, on the way he has achieved the qualities that the *tchilolo* represents:

> Il a déjà triomphé de toutes les épreuves dans sa douloureuse errance quasi initiatique. Il en a acquis un trésor de patience. Une saison à dormir au coeur du soleil lui a recuit le cuir. L'âme aussi. Ce fut l'épreuve du feu. Suivit l'épreuve de l'eau. Il dut s'abstenir de porter, quelle que soit la canicule, une seule goutte aux lèvres, malgré une soif tyrannique qui liquéfie tout sur son parcours, pour le tenter. Il apprend ainsi qu'on ne peut se gouverner sans l'entière maîtrise des sens. Qu'aucun des sens n'a d'ascendance sur le coeur du pasteur. (322)

Gaston's initiatory journey is the culmination of the various paths taken by those who precede him in this fictional universe and it is with him that the meaning of such painful journeys is most fully developed. Gaston himself wonders where his path is leading:

> Il n'a plus de nom depuis le départ, comment sera-t-il nommé quand il arrivera là où il va, s'il y arrive jamais? A quoi l'initiera ce voyage? Voyage initiatique. Il a le feu à l'âme. Son crâne est le siège de toutes les fièvres.
>
> Ce sera peut-être au sortir d'une clairière qu'il retrouvera une identité de moindre douleur et de plus de sens. (256)

Clearly he is undertaking a quest for identity and the last section of this epic narrative represents a philosophical meditation on the spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of an identity.

Gaston's arrival at his ancestral village denotes more than merely coming home. It is a metaphor which embodies his spiritual coming home for, like Prosper, Sophie, Luambu and all those who inherit from two cultures, Gaston has been torn between two worlds: the traditional world, which is deeply rooted within him and the Western world, with all its strong and conflicting forces. Leaving the village or leaving Africa represent a traumatic break with the past and results in a sense of confused identity.

This is portrayed in the narrative in various ways. In the case of Prosper for example, the duality is illustrated in his adoption of a French-sounding version for his African family name. Similarly, he is torn between his African wife Juliette and his French mistress, Aimée Volange. It is because Prosper finally understands that his place is in Africa, where he must accept responsibility for the land that his ancestors have bequeathed him, that he decides to go to France to fetch back from Aimée their baby, to whom she has unwittingly given the name of Prosper's mother.[29] In so doing, the break in the chain will be repaired.

It is in this sense too then, that Gaston's return to the ancestral home confirms that he is indeed a link in the unbroken chain of human existence.

On another dimension, in returning to his family village Gaston becomes one with the earth, as his father has already done: "Son père a déjà fait son retour à la terre. Poussière déjà!" (257) *La terre* denotes both the land, in the sense of native land, and also the soil. The notion of returning to the earth conveys the profound paradox of death; the body returns to dust and, at the same time, death ensures rebirth. Death is a release from the pain of existence, from death in life, and in dying the life force is passed on to the living.

Gaston in fact collapses unconscious not far from the *veillée* where Mouissou, emerging from a state of trance, pronounces the the following enigma:

> Il est venu ici à tatons. Je ne vois pas sa vie. Où est sa mort? Pourquoi vient-il la chercher ici? Il est là. Ecoutez, le chien qui aboie veille sur son agonie. Ne le cherchez surtout pas, craignez que la mort dont il ne veut pas ne vous prenne la vie. (326)

Much earlier she had predicted this arrival of a man, neither dead nor alive: "Un homme passera à tâtons par ici et je ne verrai pas sa vie. Sa vie ne sera plus en lui et il ne sera pas mort! Il est l'un d'eux." (167)

Does this mean that Gaston dies before he reaches the group of people gathered about the fire? Is this the *veillée* to which he refers when, at the end of his farcical trial, he refuses to plea for pardon? Or was his a spiritual death followed by a mystical rebirth? Again, the echoes of Christ's Resurrection are unmistakeable:

> Non, dès ce soir, suscitez une veillée funèbre en mon nom, j'y paraîtrai. Fais-le dire ce soir avant que la sentence n'ai été exécutée. (316)

Mouissou foresees that he will be lifeless but he will not be dead: he has not been given the proper funeral rites and so he will not be considered dead.

Another villager with psychic powers, who is in fact the great uncle of Mathilde, Gaston's mother, adds a rider to Mouissou's words: "Oui, il fallait qu'il vienne à tâtons. C'est ainsi que l'on apprend la terre." Gaston, who was a headstrong, even arrogant man, has learned humility through suffering.

Finally, it is at the ancestral village that Gaston is reunited with his mother and wife, for the two Mathildes had arrived the day before. Both had dreamed that Gaston appeared before them, dressed in white and very tired. The next morning, without need for explanations, they had set out for the the family village.

V

The mother figure is a key ideo-image in the narrative and calls for detailed consideration. Her role is dealt with at different levels, both as a protagonist in her own right and also as a major influence in the life of Prosper and Gaston. The mother is symbolically important in physical and metaphysical terms and is particularly significant in the context of Gaston's and Prosper's search for identity.

At the start of his journey Gaston pictures his mother waiting for him, ready to comfort him and dress his wounds. She represents the loving security from

which one draws strength and sustenance. The orphaned child, denied this protective support, has difficulty in making his way.

The orphan image is recurrent in U Tam'Si's writing. In his poetry, it is expressed in deeply moving images that seem to spring from U Tam'Si's own personal suffering at having been "abandoned" by his mother.[30] In the novels, Prosper and Sophie are orphaned at an early age and this has far-reaching consequences for them both. For Prosper, it meant a childhood without dreams:

> Cette enfance qu'il avait eue, sans rêveries!
> Ses rares camarades lui parlaient de leurs mères, toutes aussi puissantes que les onctions, les scarifications aux poignets ou aux tempes, destinées à vous protéger. (Cancrelats 125)

Sophie assumes the role of mother to Prosper and from this stems their ambiguous relationship. The confusion of the mother-wife figure is demonstrated again in the life of Gaston, where his mother and wife have the same name. The two Mathildes and his sister Marie-Thérèse, blend into a single woman image that is rooted deeply in his consciousness in a way that makes the notion of incest seem an empty label.

> Il a aimé une mère, une épouse, une soeur. Il se morfond de leur absence. Mais elles n'ont plus de visage distinct: que faire pour ne pas prendre l'une pour l'autre? C'est déjà arrivé. Il a cru en mourir. Mais c'est la victime de sa

méprise qui s'ensanglanta le sexe, saccagea sa vie. Pauvre petite soeur. (Ces fruits si doux 94)

As the giver of life, the mother figure does not only constitute the physical link between the living and their ancestors; on a metaphysical level, she also represents an essential element of the natural cycle of birth and death. In Ces fruits si doux, the profound symbiosis of the mother and the land is expressed in densely metaphorical language that resembles poetry. As Gaston makes his way painfully along the path, he looks around him:

> Devant, rien; derrière, rien. Rien sur la droite, rien sur la gauche. Peut-être dans l'échancrure broussailleuse à la naissance de la croupe formée par deux collines, celles de droite sont-elles deux seins. Je les caresse des yeux, je me paie une érection. Je pisse. Mon pipi ne mousse pas. Il éclate sur les brins d'herbe. Je m'aperçois que j'ai fait une pluie acide sur une colonie de fourmis. En regardant, je vois un champignon comestible, mais ainsi assaisonné de pipi, ce n'est pas possible. Mon érection finit. Je reregarde les collines, celles qui sont deux seins. Je frémis de volupté. Ce n'est pas une illusion. Il y a le ventre tout de suite après, avec une courbure souple. Il y a le pubis noir. Je cherche les cuisses. Elles y sont, elles partent de la chute du ventre. Dans les voussures quasi oblongues, parallèles bleuissantes sur la haute ligne d'horizon. (299)

The land is perceived not only as a symbol of the woman; together they are integrated, dynamic forces and Gaston is part of this natural universe that

extends beyond time and space. Physically Gaston is reduced to the basic functions of life and spiritually his being is diffused and absorbed in the world around him:

> Ah! Il me semble qu'il y avait une bouche de terre devant moi et qu'elle me déglutissait et qu'encore je voyais venir impassible ce moment fort où j'allais être définitivement digéré, autant par les clameurs des convives, sans doute, que par tout un appareil digestif plein de suc gastrique....
>
> Impression de s'éveiller à la conscience dans un espace intra-utérin. Je pense au ventre de ma mère,... (300)

Becoming absorbed in the natural world resembles returning to the "ventre de la mère." In O Tam'si's writing, this represents more than the Freudian "back to the womb complex." Again, the prose is illuminated by the poetry, where *le ventre* is developed into a complex ideo-image, denoting death and rebirth, fertility and base instincts or desires, ancestral roots and protective warmth, inspiration and divinatory practices.

> Le pli est pris, l'âme va souffrir. Il faut se compter parmi les étoiles ou fermer la bouche à la terre. Quelle poussière dans cet assolement! Un labour à main nue. Le coeur dans les dédales, dans les méandres du sang ou du corps n'a plus droit de s'exiler, sans prébende en ce jour de fête. Il fait jaune dans cette perdition. Je nomme la terre; elle s'effrite. La terre m'oppose une ombre. Je cille. Et pourquoi ce ne serait pas le sommeil? Le pli est pris. L'âme va souffrir. Un excès de soleil exile l'herbe des champs. Je dois me cultiver ce délire qui me vient du vent. (315)

In this passage, the metaphysical relationship between man and the forces of the natural world is expressed by means of esoteric and lyrical images. Gaston's journey, which is an emotional and spiritual experience, is a synthesis of ritualistic elements and the deepest, archetypal imaginings of the human psyche. His road to understanding represents both collective existence and also an individual's non-communicable experience.

In U Tam'Si's creative universe the initiatory path conveys a notion of duality at several levels. It is not only an expression of collective and personal experience, of death in life and life in death. There is in the initiatory journey a deliberate blurring of the boundaries between the real and the imagined, between the concrete and the spiritual. The initiatory path enacts the paradoxical, dual nature of human existence itself. As the reality of the physical world blurrs and fades, so the unreal, spiritual world takes on greater meaning. The last sentence of the last novel is an ambiguous rhetorical question which implies that the world cannot be understood in terms of rational, human logic:

> La jeune femme qui était avec elle, sa belle-fille, s'appelait aussi Mathilde. Elle est l'épouse du fils aîné d'un homme qui est mort

> sans laisser de tombe, dans ce monde où il vivait! Etait-ce un monde à l'envers? (327)

As U Tam'Si's extended narrative traces a skein of paths towards understanding the meaning of human existence, it questions the logical reality of the world itself. It suggests that the complex interplay of the spiritual and the physical cannot be understood in purely rational terms.

VI

The notion of duality is an important theme in the tetralogy as a whole, where the narrative moves constantly between the spiritual and the physical worlds. The theme crystallises in Ces fruits si doux, where the words of Judge Poaty open Part Two:

> Le monde est double. Deux. Le plus régénérant se passe de la matière. Le plus affligeant met la pierre au cou et le feu ardent sous les pieds. (49)

Poaty's words are significantly placed, appearing as they do in the last of the four novels, where they illuminate in retrospect the preceding narrative. They have as their field of reference both traditional and Christian metaphysics. In the consciousness not only of the people living in the populous districts of Poto-Poto and Bacongo, but also of the *évolués* such as

Prosper, Mathilde or Gaston, the teaching of the Catholic and Protestant Churches vies with belief in the power of ancestral spirits.

Much has been written about the traditional religions of Africa and a full review of the debate would be beyond the scope of the literary critic. However, it is valuable to pinpoint some of the fundamental concepts in order to illuminate U Tam'Si's fictional universe. In this, one must proceed warily for it is all too easy to make generalised statements which blurr and even distort the distinct differences that exist between the peoples of Africa. Nevertheless, certain essential cosmological beliefs appear to be shared by the majority of traditional African religions.[31]

Wole Soyinka who, like Léopold Senghor, is an eloquent exponent on African thought systems, prefers the expression "world view" to "religion". The former term is more evocative of what he terms "cosmic totalism", which he explains as the constantly revolving relationship between Man and his environment. This relationship is not determined by exteriorised deities. Its Man-centeredness is revealed in the way that ritual, as a means of mediation between the physical and the supernatural, is performed as a human and communal activity not as a "space-directed act of worship". Life is conceived of as a totality, as a universal order in which each

event is related to the whole, past and present. This concept is intrinsic to traditional African thought. Humans are perceived as essentially spiritual beings who participate fully in the system of cosmic forces wherein all existence, even the divine, manifests itself materially. It is not the external and apparent relationships between phenomena that are of interest to the traditional African mind but their intimate, essential interconnectedness. U Tam'Si's narrative must be seen in the light of this vitalistic world view, for the protagonists are intrinsically interrelated both with each other and with their world. To read the story of Prosper or of Gaston from a European manichean perspective is to privilege only one aspect of their existence and so destroy the complex system of correspondences upon which the novels are structured. In this fictional universe, the frontiers between the material and the spiritual worlds dissolve amd it is often difficult to distinguish between appearance and reality, between the mystical and the concrete. Intuitive understanding and the reading of presages is as important as rational analysis. "Le monde est double" indeed; there is no simple or definitive truth. The metaphysical concept of duality is conveyed thematically through the constant intervention of the supranatural into the daily lives of the protagonists.

These supranatural elements act as a reminder that reality is multi-dimensional.

In order to consider in some detail the significance of irrational or mysterious events in relation to the central themes of the narrative, it is useful to focus upon the second novel, Les méduses ou Les orties de mer. This, in many ways, constitutes an interlude in the saga of the Pobbard et Poaty families, a moment for reflection on the mysterious duality of existence. The novel portrays the different ways in which this duality manifests itself: the co-existence of traditional and Christian beliefs, the rational and the superstitious mind, the natural world and supernatural forces, appearance and reality, real and apparent death. A consideration of these notions as they appear in Les méduses will elucidate the increasingly metaphysical dimension of the succeeding novels.

In the introduction to La main sèche, his collection of short stories, U Tam'Si makes an observation which is illuminating for Les méduses:

> Parce qu'en vérité, toute civilisation est une rencontre syncrétique de deux mondes, au moins, barbares l'un pour l'autre, barbares l'un et l'autre. Et cela produit de toute évidence un nouveau barbare si controversé en lui-même que c'est forcément un être tragique, fatal, parce qu'habité par deux morts, celles de deux mondes qui l'ont enfanté. Ici, le monde païen et le monde chrétien.[32]

The tensions created by the confrontation of Christian and traditional beliefs are portrayed more strongly in Les méduses than in any of the other novels. André Sola, who is the senior employee in the office of the C.G.B.C. (Compagnie Générale du Bas-Congo) and colleague of Luambu, epitomises in a tragi-comic way, the traumatic effect that these contradictory forces have on an individual. André's inner confusion is expressed outwardly in his stuttering and his indecisive, often incoherent behaviour. His stuttering prevented him from realising his ambition of becoming a preacher but he remains a devout member of the Catholic Church. However, his faith is a strange mixture of Catholic ritual and traditional practices, strongly influenced by irrational superstition. He grasps fragments of latin liturgy as some sort of talisman to protect him against the evil spirit which, he is convinced, has taken hold of Luambu. In order to rid the office of Luambu's dangerous influence, he sprinkles Luambu's desk with holy water obtained from the priest; but at the same time he consults the *féticheur* and he invites him to his own house to rid it of any possible harmful forces. Ironically, it had been on André's recommendation that Luambu was promoted to the grade of book-keeper and as a sign of gratitude, Luambu had copied out for André, in beautiful Gothic script, the Credo. For a week afterwards, André had stopped

stuttering and he was convinced that the gift had miraculous powers. To give thanks to God for it, he had made a *novena* and the priest had blessed him as well as the Credo which André had placed in his missal. Unfortunately, shortly afterwards he had begun stuttering again.

In André's mind, as he becomes progressively convinced that Luambu is inhabited by an evil spirit, Luambu's gift takes on sinister powers; clearly Luambu had been trying to take André into his power. The only thing that had saved André was the fact that the priest had blessed the Credo. André is a comic figure but he is also a dangerous person for, in his confused and superstitious mind, he distorts the facts and puts out rumours that emanate from his own feverish imagination. He sets out to solve the mystery of the strangely co-incidental deaths of Elenga and Muendo, followed by Luambu's apparent coma. In the course of his investigations, he becomes increasingly illogical until he convinces himself that Luambu and Mr Martin, their office Director, are in league. He works himself into a pitiful state of terror:

> Il ouvrit la bouche mais sa langue restait raide, les mots ne purent traduire son effroyable découverte qu'il trouvait incroyable. Le ton n'était pas celui du doute, mais de l'étonnement! Il se voyait pris dans un cercle de magie blanche, tracé autour de lui par M. Martin et Luambu. M. Martin, Luambu, complices, acolytes!

> Ils allaient le détruire, car ils n'avaient pas cédé à la sollicitude de Luambu. Et Luambu comme M. Martin c'était comme l'esprit du mal dans un corps d'emprunt, lequel survit à l'abandon de l'âme qui l'habitait! Un crabe dans une coquille d'escargot. Le vrai corps de Luambu n'existait plus depuis Dieu sait quand, peut-être même celui de M. Martin! (243)

At one point, when trying to penetrate the mystery surrounding Luambu, André asks himself: "Où est la clé de tout cela? Une farce ou une fable?" Are the divine powers making fun of him or is there a lesson to be learned? André's dilemma is portrayed from two angles: on the one hand, his confusion is treated with ironic humour and yet, what he discovers about Luambu indicates that the intervention of mysterious forces cannot be ignored.

At one level then, André represents the irrational superstition of the people, who blindly accept rumours and work themselves up into a state of emotion. The novel opens with an anecdote that makes fun of such behaviour: in the Native Village of Pointe-Noire, there was for a time a total boycott of tinned meat, because it was believed that at night, a White man was running around with a magic wand transforming men, women, children and dogs into corned beef:

> La boîte de corned-beef était la plus visée et la tête du bovidé faisait une triste moue qui chagrinait....Il s'entassa sur les étals des factoreries des monceaux de boîtes de toutes les viandes imaginables, assimilées à la chair

> humaine, comment peut-on être à ce point crédule, qui - l'humidité tropicale ne pardonne pas - se muèrent en un monstrueux tas de rouille nauséabond.
>
> Surprenant de la part de gens réputés cannibales! (11)

The incredulity of the people is derided with delightful humour. However, a touch of biting irony makes a sideways stab too at the colonial mentality, illustrating at the textual level the notion of multiple perspective. Nothing is "innocent" and apparently transparent situations are open to ambiguous interpretation.

While the episode of the corned beef may be dismissed as an amusing example of irrational mass hysteria, other mysterious events are less easily discounted. Of particular significance is the *voyant* whom André consults in an attempt to discover more about Elenga and Luambu. The reader is given transposed accounts of the *voyant*'s enigmatic interpretations of the images that appear in the water of his *canari divinatoire*.

The *voyant*'s status is ambiguous. He is the only source of information about Elenga's and Luambu's background and yet he is presented as a somewhat ridiculous figure, who exploits the credulity of André and his friends. He hints at a secret crime in Luambu's past and this is confirmed by the profusion of memories and agonised thoughts that go through

Luambu's mind. The supposed crime remains however unexplained. Other mysteries too are never resolved, such as the possible connection between the Monsieur Martin of Luambu's past and the Monsieur Martin of the C.G.B.C. Or the strange figure who appears and disappears in Lilessu's home, without speaking to anyone. Who is it that André's wife and the other women saw at the market? Was it indeed Luambu? Or the "madman" on the beach, whose prophetic words hav un unmistakable ring of truth? And who is the child whom Luambu meets at the market and who leads him to the house where the child's mother was waiting for them? Why does Luambu never arrive? What is the cause of his coma?

Events are foreseen in nightmarish dreams or visions and it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between Luambu's real world and his hallucinations. To further undermine logical reasoning, chronological time is destroyed. The narrative moves without warning or transition from the present to the past or into the future, so that the reconstruction of real events is well-nigh impossible.

Clearly the confusion of appearance and reality is voluntary and it has important implications not only for Les méduses but for the tale as a whole. It is important to read the narrative in the light of the traditional belief that all elements of the universe, past and present, living and dead, are profoundly

interrelated. In terms of this holistic understanding of life, certain perplexing elements in the novels can be explained.

One aspect that the Western reader may fail to appreciate fully is the importance of apparent coincidences, with respect to both minor details and to major events. For example, the strange preacher, who predicts a bad catch for the fishermen, throws handfuls of water and stinging jellyfish at the people; later, when the boats come in, their nets contain only jellyfish. The jellyfish or *méduse* is an important ideo-image, but more than that, it is a sign or omen. Luambu is only partially able to read its hidden meaning which mysteriously links the preacher, himself and the tragic events that are to follow. The same preacher was the cause of the "coincidental" meeting on the beach of Luambu, Muendo and Elenga. They are all three young and perfectly healthy but they are to die within days of each other in abnormal circumstances. Only afterwards, when Luambu again encounters the preacher at the market place, do his prophetic words become clear; again the preacher has a bucket full of jellyfish which he is selling. He offers them for nothing to Luambu for, he says, "Je lui dois la vie...Je les lui donne. L'argent fait mourir. Il le sait. Demandez-le-lui." (255) The preacher then begins dividing the jellyfish into three piles saying "Ils étaient trois"; he changes his mind

and makes two piles: "Ils étaient deux, puis ..." Finally he puts them all together: "Non, le tout lui revient. Il est le seul qui reste de ceux qui m'ont sauvé la vie des mains des pêcheurs! Je vais sauver la tienne."

The preacher's reference to the fatal effect of money is illuminating for Luambu. He understands how his troubled past has prevented him from living fully in the present. He understands the meaning of the words that the preacher had directed to him, that first day on the beach:

> De quelle vie voulez-vous vivre, en mettant tant de fumée entre vos yeux et votre coeur? (75)

The "chance" meeting of the three men on the beach, the preacher's strange words, the jellyfish, Luambu's past and the deaths of his friends are linked by more than mere coincidence. They are meaningfully inter-connected by mysterious forces that transcend time and space as measured in the physical world.

On several occasions it is clearly stated in the text that there is in fact, no such thing as chance, or coincidence. To speak of chance does not explain anything: "Il faut voir et comprendre." Everything has meaning but the hidden relationships are not immediately apparent.

In particular, death is never accidental. U Tam'Si said in an interview:

> Dans mon pays, il est d'usage que quelqu'un qui meurt ne meure jamais de mort naturelle.[33]

Death is a dominant theme not only of Les méduses but of all four novels. Prosper's saga begins in Les cancrelats with the strange reluctance of his uncle, Tchiluembh, to explain the circumstances of the grandfather's death. Tchiluembh had broken with tradition and had walked ahead of his father, Mué Mbumbh Buangh, when they had gone off into the forest. He had somehow lost his father and the guilt and the shame plagued him and soured his relations with his family. Prosper's own father dies in a motor accident, leaving him and Sophie orphaned. His dead forbearers are an important point of reference in Prosper's life, as he struggles to understand his own identity. He recognises that the ancestors participate in the life of the living in a very real way, yet he cannot understand why he should have been made to suffer by the seemingly pointless removal of his parents, leaving him orphaned at an early age. Only when he finally attains emotional maturity can he accept that these apparently accidental deaths form part of a vast chain of existence whose continuity he must not break.

Funzi had said in Les carcrelats, "La vie est une veillée funèbre" and indeed the harsh conditions of life weigh heavily upon the protagonists. Life is imbued with the reality of death and death is not a finality but part of a continuum, a stage where a more profound understanding is reached of the mysterious processes that lie at the heart of existence. This concept illuminates the paradoxical words that stand in exergue to the second part of Ces fruits si doux:

> Raymond Poaty, magistrat et magicien dupé par sa mort, qui eut honte de ses errements. En ces temps-là, la vie et l'espoir avaient beaucoup en commun, jusqu'au jour où la vie querella l'espoir. L'espoir querella la vie. Il y eut déchirement puis divorce parce que, entre autres manquements, le juge ne sut quel verdict prononcer. Qui condamner, qui débouter? Comme il ne put pas mettre sa mémoire à l'heure des temps nouveaux, il tomba dans l'oubli de lui-même et des autres, ses semblables. Ainsi finit le destin des personnes dont la témérité manque de subtilité. (47)

Having lost his hope and his sense of direction, Poaty was to all intents and purposes, dead. That his body was never found serves to emphsise that his was a spiritual death: "il tomba dans l'oubli de lui-même et des autres, ses semblables."

It is significant to note that already in Les méduses, spiritual death is given concrete form. Luambu falls into a coma and for the superstitious people of Pointe-Noire, this only serves to prove that

he was indeed a sorcerer and his house is avoided thereafter.

> Diabolique ce coma qui avait fini par effrayer, éloigner, décourager tout téméraire indiscret. Non pas que le coin fût lugubre. Le calme et l'abandon. Une oasis suspecte de maléfices, enfantée par le mirage ou la folle imagination de ceux qui juraient sur la tête du plus vénéré de leurs ancêtres, ou au nom de Dieu! que ce coma pouvait bien durer depuis cent ans, ce qui pouvait être normal car un tel homme pouvait même défier la mort, ce qui ne serait pas étonnant, vu que.... (22)

U Tam'Si himself offers a clue as to the meaning of Luambu's coma:

> ... c'est l'emprise coloniale sur les êtres, mais vécue intérieurement, profondément.[34]

His meaning becomes clear if these words are placed in the context of the earlier quotation from his introduction to La main sèche. A person caught between two cultures is torn apart; one who is "habité par deux morts" must find a new "identité de synthèse." It is a sort of madness for such a person:

> qui parcourt un champ intérieur en quête de soi, qui se voit chaviré, éclaté, contraint à l'exercice d'un étrange remembrement en vue d'une culture intensive, sans quoi, c'est la chute ou le coma. (Main sèche 7)

Luambu fails to establish a new identity. He runs from his past, plagued by guilt and fear, so that

he is unable to accept the gift of Mazola's love. He is imprisoned in the tortured, nightmarish universe of his inner thoughts. The death of his two friends pushes him over the brink and he becomes completely detached from the real world around him.

Indeed, from the start, Luambu is presented as "un être sans identité." To begin with, his name poses a problem. No-one ever knew his first name, only his family name, Lufwa Lumbu, meaning "death song". The opinion of Sola and his friends that such a name is not a name is confirmed by the *voyant*:

> Et si c'est un nom, celui qui l'a porté n'a jamais été un homme de chair et de sang.(196)

In a society where the name is of social and ontological significance, to have doubts raised about a person's name has profound implications. Not only is that person's identity in question but, more traumatically, he or she is cut off from the ancestors. In a sense, that person ceases to exist.

In the case of Luambu, who seems to have no family or ancestral ties, this state of non-existence is such that he becomes at time irvisible. In the office, his presence is barely noticed, so that after his departure his colleagues can remember nothing of his physical features. Furthermore, it is believed that after having been taken to the hospital in his

state of coma, he disappeared from the hospital bed.

Luambu has nothing to give solidarity and security to his life. He drifts at the mercy of events, locked within himself, prisoner of his fantasies and fears:

> A quoi se raccrocher? ce coquillage - d'une moule géante, qu'il ramasse? A ce bout de bois noir qu'il ramasse, triture fébrilement, casse et jette à la tête d'écume de la vague qui menace d'aller au-delà de la frontière où l'homme garde les pieds secs, l'âme franche? Rien, il n'a rien à quoi se raccrocher. Il se peuple de moi, qui le traque, le rejette du monde - l'esseule. Plus friable que sable au vent. (168)

Les méduses represents an interlude between the first and second parts of Prosper's story. The closing lines convey a message which illuminates the remaining two novels. As he falls into a coma, Luambu seems to hear Julienne's voice saying to him:

> Avec la vie en face des yeux, personne ne perd la face...Aime-la.

Luambu turned away from challenges that life presented and he failed to find "une identité de synthèse." This adds an important dimension to the stories of Prosper and Gaston, who face up to life and commit themselves to something beyond their own immedicate world. In so doing they become beings of

substance, capable of assuming their full place in the chain of human existence.

VII

The duality of existence, in its various manifestations, is a th[illegible] motif that runs through the whole narrative. This notion of duality is further reinforced at the level of the narrative discourse itself, where the treatment of time reflects the plurality of being.

In contrast to the Western concept of time as a linear relation between cause and effect, fictional time in these novels is non-linear and multi-dimensional. This can be illustrated by a close textual analysis of one or two sections of the narrative. First of all however, it is useful to consider briefly how time is perceived traditionally in Africa.

In Myth, Literature and the African World, Wole Soyinka's explanation of the Yoruba conception of time is illuminating in this respect. He emphasises that the Yoruba way of understanding time is profoundly integrated into the "life-rhythm, mores and social organisation" of Yoruba society. Such a concept:

> denies periodicity to the existences of the dead, the living and the unborn....It is also an affective social principle which intertwines multiple existences so absolutely that, to take

> a common enough example, an elderly man would refer to a child as **baba** (father, or elder) if the circumstances of his birth made his actual entry into the living world retrospective. (10-11)

This sense of integrated, multiple existence is enlightening for a reading of U Tam'Si's fictional universe, where people and events are linked in patterns that transcends chronological time.

A second characteristic of the traditional perception of time is the way in which past and present time predominate, to the virtual exclusion of the future, a feature which is often reflected in the language structures themselves. This provides an interesting insight into U Tam'Si's narrative, where the past weighs heavily on the present and where geneological roots serve as an important point of reference in the daily lives of the protagonists.

The work of Marcel Griaule is of great value as a representative ethnological study of temporal concepts. His detailed observations of the traditional practices of the Dogon people reveal their notion of time as constituting two parallel and consecutive series, the one (mythical) superimposed upon the other (historical). This concept of duality is strikingly illustrated in Les méduses. A close analysis of the apparent temporal confusion reveals a coherent structure based on two parallel time series, where the mythical or supranatural invades the

historical. The following schematic representation of the novel illustrates this. Highlighting distinguishes "mythical" from "historical" events and the resultant patterning shows that the apparently bewildering confusion of past and present events in reality forms two synchronic series.

The facts of a strange series of deaths which took place at Pointe-Noire in June 1944 are related. (11-33)

The *voyant*, consulted by André Sola after the death of the three friends, looks into their past. (35-72)

The three meet "by chance" on the beach where they save the strange preacher from being attacked by the irate fishermen. (73-84)

Rumours and superstitious conjecture among the people of Pointe-Noire regarding the deaths of Elenga and Muendo, and Luambu's coma. (85-92)

Elenga and Luambu, later joined by Muendo, meet on the beach and talk. They again come upon the mad preacher. On returning to his house, Luambu refuses the advances of Mazola, Elenga's sister. Later, Elenga rejects Massengo's offer of mariage to Mazola. (93-118)

Victorine is convinced that she and her friends saw Luambu, "l'homme du coma", at the market. (119-28)

Luambu meets Mazola at midday and they walk on the beach. At 5 o'clock Elenga meets Luambu. Muendo joins them. They walk on the beach and talk about the day. (131-152)

Sola and his colleagues at the office attempt to explain to Monsieur Martin that Luambu was a sorcerer. (155-58)

Luambu walks alone on the beach. Muendo joins him. They again come upon the mad preacher. Later, Muendo finds Luambu at home to tell him

that Elenga had been killed that afternoon. (161-89)

André invites his colleagues to his home where the *voyant* chases away the evil spirit of Luambu. André becomes increasingly tormented as he tries to puzzle out the Luambu's role in the deaths of Elenga and Muendo. (193-205)

On his way to the office, Luambu misses Muendo by a few minutes. At lunchtime he walks alone on the beach. Later he learns of the death of Muendo. Luambu walks off into the night. (209-35)

A week after Muendo's death, (June 30) Sola becomes convinced that Monsieur Martin and Luambu are accomplices, both spirits of evil. (239-46)

Luambu follows from afar the funeral procession of Muendo. From there he finds himself at the market where he sees the strange prophet. A young boy leads him away to where "his mother" is waiting for Luambu. As he approaches his house, which is next to the cemetary, he falls into a coma. (249-65)

The highlighted sections represent a series of interludes, interspersing the carefully dated sequence of events that took place between Tuesday 20th and Saturday 24th in June 1944. The interludes are characterised by consultations with the *voyant*, the superstitious imaginings of Sola and the rumour-mongering of the people of Pointe-Noire.

The facts of the story are related with apparent concern for their authenticity. The narrative opens with the words "L'histoire que voici se passe à peu près à l'époque où,..." but instead of linking the story to historically verifiable events, the narrator relates the "corned beef" episode, which may, he says, share some similarity with the account in the pages

that follow. Indeed, whenever a precise date is given, a rider undermines its validity:

> 'Deux hommes sont morts dans la dernière semaine de juin 1944.' 'Ils étaient trois à mourir....' Mais le troisième ne mourut pas, par miracle peut-être. Qui peut savoir? (13)

The initial interventions by the narrator, as he preludes his account by "je dis que...", confer a ring of authenticity to the tale, but this soon gives way to the more vague "on dit que ..." and the ensuing confusion of surmise and rumour. The concept of historical time itself is undermined, for we are told that the coma lasted fifty or sixty years, maybe even a hundred!

> Quand le temps **paraît** interminable, cinquante ou soixante ans font une assez bonne mesure pour que les mémoires postulent pour une quelconque fiabilité. Après tout, l'exagération était somme toute modérée, on pouvait aller jusqu'à cent.... C'est que l'on voit de ces choses! Des prodiges! Les miracles, on n'est pas toujours assez attentifs pour les voir et en faire le compte. Des miracles, des mirages, des prodiges ...Ce n'est pas pour un coma qu'on aurait des vertiges...." (24-5) (emphasis added)

From the start then, the notion of time as a fixed and measurable phenomenon is destroyed and the temporal structure of the novel serves to underline this. The constant interplay between historical and mythical time sequences, show that reality is a question of perspective, that being and appearance are

at times indistinguishable. "Quand on raconte ce que l'on rapporte, chacun ajoute une part d'invraisemblance pour faire vrai." The "facts" of the story are known from the start but not the "truth".

The reader who hopes by the end of the novel to be able to identify the truth will be disappointed. The constantly changing point of view makes it impossible to know what really did happen. This is deliberate and integral to the philosophical foundation of U Tam'Si's writing: "Identifier une chose, c'est limiter ses possibilities."

A second striking example of the interplay between historical and mythical time is found in Ces fruits si doux, where the legends and visions recounted by the prophetess, Mouissou, relate directly to the story of the Poaty family.

Early in the narrative, a link is established between the two; returning from a visit to his family village, Judge Poaty meets on the side of the road a little girl selling sweet potatoes. For some reason he stops. Her name is Mouissou, the name of his deceased mother, and she appears ageless. "Sans âge, parce que son regard était insondable. Comme le passé...." Immediately after the section where Judge Poaty recounts this episode, there follows a key passage of the narrative. Poaty is in his

"sanctuaire", meditating in a transe-like state on the duality of the world. Poaty is himself a double being, for he is devoutly religious and yet he also has occult powers. That evening, a vivid scene is conjured up before him, drawn from the hidden recesses of his mind.

> ..ce sont les images d'une scène qui, sans doute, quelque part en lui, parasite sa mémoire. Qui s'y sont incrustées, Dieu sait quand. En quels temps très anciens ou très proches? Il pourrait le savoir s'il s'en donnait la peine. Savoir de quelle vie ces images qui défilent sous ses yeux sont le reflet.... Cette vie-là côtoie la sienne ... (52)

The scene that follows is undoubtedly that observed by Poaty. Mouissou's mother, a priestess, has been called to snatch back a dying soul from death. Intoning the same incantation that Poaty uses shortly afterwards, "une formule de protection", she appears to succeed, for the drum rhythm echoes the pulse of a heart "qui revient à la vie, en haletant." There follows a profoundly ambiguous passage:

> Le juge Raymond Poaty n'aura pas l'âme de cet agonisant. Il la perd dans ce combat, n'ayant pas pris soin de se munir du prix de la victoire. Une âme achète une âme. Un corps paie un corps. La nuit est noire qui s'ajoute à la noirceur du coeur de l'homme qui est avide de tout. Ainsi, la cendre tient tout son sel du feu qui le lègue en mourant. (54)

The extent of Poaty's occult powers is never fully revealed but his intimate knowledge of the

supranatural world is clear and, more importantly, close rapport between his world and that of Mouissou is firmly established.

The next appearance of Mouissou comes immediately after the kidnapping of Judge Poaty. It is the time of *la veillée* and the villagers are gathered around listening to Mouissou recount the legend of King Moé Mpouaty Ou Kala Moungou and Moé Zambi Mpoungou who had twelve daughters, four of whom were named Mathilde I, Mathilde II, Mathilde III and Mathilde IV. Apart from the resemblance of name, the legend appears to have no direct link with the events taking place in the life of the Poaty family. However, Mouissou is suddenly unable to continue with her story for she appears to have a vision that fills her with fear. *La veillée* comes to an abrupt end, leaving a sense of threat and impending disaster.

Mouissou reappears shortly afterwards in a considerably longer scene where she recounts in detail the legend of Taty, who has the power to speak with animals and birds but who meets his downfall because he is unable to keep his secret from his jealous, ill-tempered wife. The moral of the tale is only indirectly significant for the Poaty story: misfortune to all those who cannot keep a secret. However, there is a clear temporal link with Poaty. This particular *veillée* takes place at the beginning of the October rainy season, the time of Poaty's

abduction, when for a week the region was invaded by flying ants - an omen of death. The relevance to Judge Poaty is unmistakable:

> Les dons de voyance de Mouissou étaient redoutables. Mauvais présage ou pas, ce qui est sûr, c'est qu'il y a, dans le vol mal réussi de ces pauvres insectes, un rien de tragique et de pathétique à la fois. Cela symbolise trop l'élan brisé. Le feu de paille de la vie sans lendemain. L'apothéose dérisoire d'une vie vécue dans la fulgurance. (164)

The death that Mouissou foresees evidently takes place in town, for she describes a scene where houses are not made of poles and straw but have walls as hard as stone.

At the start of her story, Mouissou had uttered yet another enigma:

> Un homme passera à tâtons par ici et je ne verrai pas sa vie. Sa vie ne sera plus en lui et il ne sera pas mort! Il est l'un d'eux. (167)

The repetition of these words at the end of the novel, as Gaston approaches his ancestral village, has the effect of telescoping time, as if the intervening events are reduced to the span of a single evening's *veillée*. Time is measured in terms of moments of significance, not by the chronological passage of quantifiable instants. It is in this way that U am'Si conveys the sense of two worlds lived simultaneously, as one.

When Mouissou appears again, she has begun recounting another legend, that of Mavoungou whose sister Tchitoulhè has been taken prisoner by strange creatures that have no legs. Mavoungou is urged to go to the rescue of his sister. Here the link with the story of Gaston and Mathilde is as yet tenuous, although the urgent sense of danger preludes what is to follow: Gaston's meeting with members of the MPLA, when it will become clear to him and Mathilde that he is in grave danger.

Mouissou's story is developed more fully later, where it acts as a direct comment on Gaston's incestuous relationship with his sister, Marie-Thérèse. As Gaston procedes along his painful physical and spiritual journey "home", the narrative oscillates, without linguistic or typographical signals, from Gaston to Mavoungou and his beautiful sister, who is now called Ngondi. Their mother has told them that they are of an age to leave home and so they set off to the sound of the birds singing praises to Ngondi's beauty. But the reference to "cortège nuptial" serves as a grim warning.

In the final pages, the various threads are drawn together as historical and mythical time meet. The mysterious balding stranger who appears to have masterminded Gaston's escape and who had been foreseen by Mouissou early in the narrative, arrives at the village as Mouissou recounts the final episodes of the

Mavoungou and Ngondi story. Gaston too has reached the edge of the village, shortly after the two women, his wife and mother.

In U Tam'Si's narrative, the intervention of supranatural elements and the deliberate disruption of chronological time ensure that events cannot be entirely accounted for by rational explanation. This is integral to the philosophical grounding of the novels and is revealing of thought modes that differ fundamentally from Western notions of reality. Martial Sinda, himself from Congo-Brazzaville, makes some interesting observations in this respect. Speaking of the Lari, he says:

> ... tout est complexe dans la pensée africaine et il faut s'efforcer de la saisir comme une totalité irréductible aux catégories occidentales. D'une part, les différents compartiments dans lesquels les occidentux rangent les événements qu'ils vivent, n'existent pas pour les Lari; si l'on préfère, la croyance en un ordre universel fait que chaque événement est rapporté à l'ensemble des événements passés ou à venir ... [35]

Bearing in mind the reservations already expressed about the dangers of defining an "African mind", Sinda's words nevertheless have obvious significance for Congolese writing in general and for U Tam'Si's fiction in particular.

This portrayal of life as a multi-dimensional reality reflects a holistic perception of the world, whereby meaning lies in complexity itself and paradox

is explored to reveal the hidden interrelatedness of all things. At the level of thematic and temporal structures, U Tam'Si's narrative conveys the belief that human existence cannot be compartmentalised and, as the following chapter will show, this is reinforced through the deliberate ambiguity of the ideo-images.

NOTES

1. Les cancrelats (Paris: Albin Michel, 1980).
Les méduses ou Les orties de la mer (Paris: Albin Michel, 1982).
Les phalènes (Paris: Albin Michel, 1984).
Ces fruits si doux de l'arbre à pain (Paris: Seghers, 1987).
All future references will be made to these editions. Further quotations will be identified parenthetically in the text.

2. In U Tam'Si's own narrative, names of even central characters vary. For example, Prosper's family name is spelled variously as Mpob, Mpoba and Mpohba. The French version of his name is given as Pobard and also as Pobbard.

3. Tchicaya U Tam'si, personal interview, 16 September 1986.

4. For a comprehensive history of this issue within the Francophone zones of Africa, see Bernard Mouralis, Littérature et développement (Paris: Silex/ACCT, 1984)

5. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, interview, Afrique 57 (juillet 1966).

6. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, Le mauvais sang suivi de Feu de brousse et A triche-coeur (Paris: Harmattan, 1978). All future references will be made to this edition. Further quotations will be identified parenthetically in the text.

7. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, personal interview, Paris, 16 Septembre, 1986.

8. Pius Ngandu Nkashama, La littérature africaine écrite (Issy les Moulineaux: Edtions St Paul, 1979) 8.

9. When asked about committed writing, U Tam'Si rejected the idea that literature has a socio-political role. In an interview published in Fraternité Matin (6 janvier 1981) he refuted categorically the idea that the writer's vocation is to move crowds. Such writers are, he said, "des fascistes, je ne mâche pas mes mots, ce sont des FAS-CIS-TES, des violeurs de conscience".

10. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, Le Ventre, le Pain ou la Cendre (Paris: Présence Africaine 1978) All future references will be made to this edition.

Any further quotations will be identified parenthetically in the text.

11. "U Tam'Si" has been translated as "petite feuille qui parle pour son pays" Calao 81 (mai-juin 1988), "petite feuille qui parle du pays" Bingo 425 (juin 1988) or again "celui qui voit peut parler" Calao 37 (1981) or "regardez ce que je vois" Fraternité Matin (janvier 6 1981)

12. elle pensa que c'est là peut-être
une herbe des savanes
simplement polissone
l'herbe montra ses griffes
c'est une herbe vandale
en témoigne la lune
et cette herbe
envahissante le corps
de cette femme mère
la mère lui tint tête
ouvrant large ses bras
sur le champ de son corps
son sexe musicien devant
noir de soleil ardent
la guerre commença
par une tiède saison de labour
(A triche-coeur 128)

13. Of particular interest here is the poem "Natte à tisser," Le mauvais sang (56-8). Oblique references to U Tam'Si's life in Paris as a young man show that the poem is clearly inspired by personal experiences of ostracism and racism. Yet the personal is transmuted through the ideo-images, to speak for his compatriots, past and present.

14. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, La veste d'intérieur suivi de Notes de veille (Paris: Nubia, 1977) 17. All future references will be made to this edition. Further quotations will be identified parenthetically in the text.

15. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, interview, "Les mobiles de l'engagement nous ramènent à notre état de nègres," Le monde africain (13 juin 1976).

16. Tzvetan Todorov, Poétique de la prose (Paris: Seuil, 1971) 39-40.

17. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, recorded interview, Radio France Internationale, October 1982.

18. Roger Godard, Trois poètes congolais (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1985) 149.

19. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, Arc musical précédé de Epitomé (Paris: P.J.Oswald, 1970). All future references will be made to this edition. Any further quotations will be identified parenthetically in the text.

20. Ne donnez pas
tant que vous n'êtes pas sûr
que ce que vous donnez
tombera dans une coeur.
Ne demande pas
tant que vous n'êtes pas sûr
que ce que vous demandez
peut vous être donné.
Méfiez-vous de toute gé-
nérosité, défiez-vous d'où
qu'elle vienne.
Le don de soi est encore
une forme de suicide!
Le Ventre 50.

21. Roger Mercier makes a useful distinction between "le fantastique", in the sense of the supernatural, and "le supranaturel": "Le supranaturel est, chez les auteurs africains, plutôt merveilleux ou mythique que fantastique, il emprunte ses images, non à l'inconscient, mais à un fonds traditionnel c[illegible] à tout un groupe ethnique ou linguistiq[illegible] parfois même plus général, exploité dans la plupart des recueils de contes, qui fournit souvent, par des légendes cosmologiques, l'explication des phénomènes naturels dont la cause échappe à l'observation directe, et qui a ainsi une fonction didactique importante." "La littérature négro-africaine et son public," Revue de littérature comparée 48 (juillet-déc. 1974): 402.

22. Note for example the conclusion reached by Georges Balandier in Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 1982) 473. "Ainsi, il ne paraît pas exclu que la notion de 'Sauveur', homme élu pour souffrir et assurer par sa souffrance le progrès des tribus kongo, ne soit dans sa forme locale une contamination de l'enseignement judéo-chrétien et de données anciennes."

23. Jean-Paul Sartre's essay, "Pensée politique de Patrice Lumumba," Situations, 7 (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), gives insight into the political aspirations and influence of Patrice Lumumba.

24. H. Aguessy, "Les dimensions spirituelles: religions traditionnelles africaines," Présence Africaine 117-8 (1981): 138-48.

25. Dominique Zahan, Religion, Spirituality and Thought in Traditional Africa (Chicago: U.Chicago Press, 1979) 54.

26. Theologians are divided on the exact day of Christ's arrest. According to John's Gospel, Jesus was arrested in the period before Passover, probably on the night of Wednesday to Thursday. However, according to the Synoptic Gospels, the Last Supper and Christ's subsequent arrest took place on the evening of Thursday leading through to Friday. (see the commentary by Raymond Brown on the Gospel of John in the Acher Bible Series, 555-56.) Be this at it may, it is unlikely that U Tam'Si would have been particularly concerned by the theological debate. Furthermore, it would seem that in general the Catholic Church favours John's version. Read together with subsequent, unmistakable Biblical references, the manner in which Gaston's arrest is announced clearly portrays him as a Christ figure.

27. Quoted in Roger Chemain, Arlette Chemain-Degrange, Panorama critique de la littérature congolaise contemporaine (Paris:Présence Africaine,1979) 212.

28. "Je regardai encore, je vis l'Agneau debout sur la montagne de Sion, et avec lui cent quarante-quatre mille personnes qui avaient son nom, et le nom de son Père écrit sur le front."
Saint Jean, l' Apocalypse

29. At the beginning of Les phalènes, the knowledge of this responsibility troubles Prosper and in a sense the novel represents his coming to terms with this responsibility: "Le voilà en charge du pays des défunts et il ne sait pas ce qu'ils voulaient que ce pays fût. Il sait que c'est au prix de cette charge que le mérite viendra." (54)

30. The exact circumstances surrounding U Tam'Si's mother are difficult to ascertain. However, it is not so much the verifiable facts of U Tam'Si's childhood that are important for understanding the images, as the manner in which he perceived them.

31. See for example the cross-section of writings represented by the following titles. Théophile Obenga and Georges Balandier are particularly

helpful, since their writings concern the area covered by the ancient kingdom of the Kongo.

Georges Balandier, Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire (Paris: P.U.F. 1955); Théophile Obenga, La cuvette congolaise. Les hommes et les structures (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976); Marcel Griaule, Masques dogons (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1938); Dieu d'eau (Paris: Fayard, 1966). Dominique Zahan, The Religion, Spirituality and Thought of Traditional Africa (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1979); Abiola Irele, The African Experience in Literature and Ideology (London: Heinemann, 1981); Isadore Okpewho, Myth in Africa (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983); Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976); Sulayman S. Nyang, "La cosmologie africaine," Courier UNESCO (1982): 27-32.

All future references will be made to these editions. Quotations will be identified parenthetically in the text.

32. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, La main sèche (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1980) 8.

33. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, recorded intervew, Radio France Internationale, October 1982.

34. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, recorded interview, R.F.I., October 1982.

35. Martial Sinda, Le messianisme congolais et ses incidences politiques (Paris: Payot, 1972) 237.

PART TWO

CHAPTER FIVE

THE STRUCTURING AND SEMIOLOGICAL ROLE OF THE IDEO-IMAGE

In terms of conventional Western critical theory, U Tam'Si's novels present something of a dilemma; the term "novel" itself is problematical for it imposes a theoretical strait jacket, presupposing a set of criteria that are inadequate or even misleading for a satisfactory elucidation of his four major works of fiction. If however, they are viewed not as four separate novels but as a single prose poem, many of the apparently discordant features fall into place. The extended parentheses, the loose structure and the strong sense of the writer-narrator's presence, are essential characteristics of the epic tale.

The significance of reading U Tam'Si's prose against the background of the oral tradition will be examined in the following chapter and in particular, it will be seen how the epic, the dramatic, and the poetic genres co-exist in his narrative. In this chapter, although conventional terminology, as used by the reader, critic and publisher alike, makes it difficult to avoid referring to U Tam'Si's prose works as "novels", they will be treated as a single poetic discourse.

Indeed, U Tam'Si's prose obeys poetic imperatives - this is one of the most striking features of his

narrative - and of central importance in this respect is the ideo-image. As the following study will reveal, the ideo-image is not only of semiological and philosophical importance but it also plays an essential structuring role within the dynamics of U Tam'Si's fictional discourse.

As in the preceding chapter, the discussion of U Tam'Si's prose takes cognisance of his poetry, for U Tam'Si the poet cannot be divorced from U Tam'Si the prose writer. Although the novels were published only in the 1980's, U Tam'Si himself said he began writing them during the fifties, that is, at the same time as many of his poems. It must be remembered too, that the major part of his epic tale had been conceived of as a single narrative that, for practical considerations, had been published in the form of the first three novels. Therefore, in order to appreciate his extended imagery and thought patterns, both his poetry and fictional writing must be read as a whole and preferably in chronological order.

This investigation into the dynamics of the ideo-image in U Tam'Si's narrataive will begin by focussing on its structuring function.[1] It will be illuminating to consider first and in some detail the role of the ideo-image in U Tam'Si's poetry.

When viewed globally, the overall shape and development of U Tam Si's seven collections of poetic

writing can be compared to that of an orchestra. In fact, he consciously emphasised music as a structural element in his first collection of poems, Le mauvais sang, which has musical terms as subtitles to the two main sections. In a piece of orchestral music, the part for a single instrument may be extracted from the score and enjoyed in isolation but it only acquires its full meaning when integrated into the orchestrated whole. Similarly, the full force of a single poem's expression and vision is only released when it is read in the context of the whole body of U Tam'Si's poetry. His poetic discourse works extendedly: an idea or image, initially introduced almost unobtrusively, will be picked up in successive poems, where a different context or emphasis will add new layers of meaning until it attains the value of a symbol. U Tam'Si's poetic and fictional discourse at times reads like a form of shorthand, where a single ideo-image signifies a complexity of meaning, intelligible only if the reader has followed its development.

The significance of overall shape or structure in U Tam'Si's poetry can be illustrated by the collection entitled Le ventre. The final poem, "le ventre reste", takes up successively and almost line by line, the thirteen titles of the poems which make up the collection, so that each phrase releases the complexity of emotion and meaning that was developed in the poem of that title. The whole is woven

together in a perfectly controlled and unified statement which, in the final stanza, ends with a vision of hope:

> Dieu merci les voyants tombent
> le plus souvent sur le dos
> le plus souvent les bras ouverts
> le plus souvent
> le ventre face au ciel! (138)

A chronological reading of the poems in the collection would reveal how the emergence of *le ventre* as a major ideo-image determines the integrated structure of the whole. This rhythmic pattern is a constant in U Tam'Si's writing, a structural technique which can be found in his first collections of poems and which is developed to a striking degree in his later works.

In Le mauvais sang, the repetition of semiological and linguistic elements creates a system of cross references that link the poems together. At the same time, key ideo-images are introduced, such as blood, water, the woman/mother/Africa and the Christ. In later volumes, the title of a poem is often anticipated in the preceding poem, thus reinforcing the sense of pattern in terms of both ideas and sounds.[2] This repetition is not static; each reappearance of an image brings to it a new dimension and its development can be traced through U Tam'Si's entire creative writing. It is significant that many

of the key ideo-images in his poetry are important signifiers in his prose.[3]

The musicality of U Tam'Si's prose will be considered in more detail later, but in order to understand how the ideo-image functions structurally and how it determines progression, it is useful to draw a parallel with the rhythmic patterns of African music. The repeated phrases, often monotonous to the Western ear, represent subtle variations which mark the forward movement of the song or dance. Significantly, this development takes place over an extended time span.

The rhythmic repetition of image and sound gives U Tam'Si's work a strong sense of overall form and consistency. As core ideas or images are developed by association and correspondence, they operate simultaneously at several levels. The major ideo-images do not work in isolation; they link up with others so that a chain of ever-widening reference is created.

In Le mauvais sang, blood, one of the most complex of the ideo-images, relates to water and the river (the Congo river); this leads on to thoughts and memories and diving (back into the stream of time, the past); from there it links with *la pirogue* and shipwreck. Each one of these links in the image-chain acquires greater resonance as it is picked up and developed in a later poem or collection. Blood is

inseparable from the Christ figure which, introduced in Le mauvais sang, becomes a dominant image in Epitomé and Le Ventre. Similarly, water and rain link with the immense Congo River, which reflect the past and potential grandeur of the country, the dream of a people re-united, just as the tributaries of the Congo River link across the land. The Congo River is also the source of identity.[4] Furthermore, it represents the total giving of self, the poetic vocation and commitment to an ideal. Yet again, U Tam'Si has compared his poetry to the Congo river, "qui charrie autant de cadavres que de jacinthes d'eau."[5] Water, like blood, is a sacrificial and cleansing element and as the river leads to the ocean, so it links up with another very important ideo-image in U Tam'Si's discourse; the ocean/salt/waves/sea-gull.

To elucidate fully these ideo-images, each one would have to be analysed in the context of U Tam'Si's creative writing as a whole. However, this brief look at the way in which they function in the poetry provides some va able insights for the novels, where in a similar way, certain key ideo-images determine structure.

One of the most important ideo-images in the first part of U Tam'Si's epic tale and to which it gives its name, is that of *le cancrelat*.[6] *Le cancrelat* appears too in his early poetry and although

the image is not systematically developed, it nevertheless offers a clue to at least one aspect of the ideo-image's semiological role:

> Ouvrez votre bouche et vos mains: des cancrelats! Je ne vous vois ni père, ni mère, ni frères.... (Mauvais sang 34)

The barren solitude of the orphan or exile is suggested by the image of the mouthful or handful of rasping, hard-backed, scuttling insects. In Feu de brousse, the cockroach is part of a nightmarish vision of ants, black hornless buffaloes and hyenas. (Feu de brousse 66). Clearly, the unpleasant aspect of the cockroach is firmly established in U Tam'Si's scheme of reference. This is illuminating with respect to the evolution of the ideo-image in his fiction.

Le cancrelat not only lends its name to the first of the four novels but it is also a key element of the proverb quoted in proem: "Le cancrelat alla plaider une cause au tribunal des poules!" The ironic humour of a situation where the coackroach should seek justice at the hands of its mortal enemy is not difficult to grasp but the significance for the novels is less evident. Is the author commenting ironically on human beings, on their limited vision and their inability to comprehend the laws of existence? The answer to this will be revealed only progressively, as apparently insignificant allusions to *la scarabée* and

seemingly unrelated references to the proverb slowly build up a pattern which, in retrospect, illuminates Les cancrelats.

The coackroach establishes itself as an important signifier in the third chapter, entitled "The night". It is 1930, fourteen years after the death of their father Ndundu, and Sophie and Prosper are living in Vista, one of the poorest parts of Diosso. Sophie wakes up late, feeling drained after a night disturbed by dreams that have left her with a sense of foreboding. She is horrified to find a host of cockroaches in her roll of new sleeping mats. To rid herself of them, she calls in her fowls who devour all but the biggest one, which even the great rooster does not dare attack. Surely the cockroaches have no connection with her bad dream? Yet the sense of impending doom persists. And a few hours later Prosper, wrongly accused of stealing from the Portuguese factory owner, is taken off by the militia.

That the episode of the cockroaches is in some way significant is confirmed now by Prosper, as he stands in silence, confronted by the vociferous accusations of the White man and surrounded by the booing crowd. He abandons any attempt to defend his innocence; instead, his mind turns to his sister Sophie and the scene that he had witnessed that morning. The largest cockroach had dared to defy the

rooster; perhaps it had known that the fine spurs and beak and plumes were only show? But one could not be sure - and in any event, Sophie could not know whether the coackroach had really escaped or whether the rooster had eaten it in the end, for Prosper had arrived on the scene and distracted her attention.

In Prosper's mind, the gratuitous laws that rule the cockroaches' existence seem to reflect the laws of human justice, which is both unpredictable and partisan - be it in the Congo under French colonial rule, or in the independent Congo of Ces fruits si doux de l'arbre à pain, as Judge Poaty and his son Gaston learn to their cost. Prosper pleads his cause in vain to the established authorities; the crowds presume him to be guilty and the militia maltreat him. Luambu, the truck driver, saves Prosper from the militia without knowing or caring whether he be innocent or not. Although Luambu is a passing figure in Les cancrelats, when he reappears as one of the main protagonists in Les méduses, he too is hounded by irrational "justice".

The episode of the coackroach confronting the rooster serves as a point of reference by which Prosper's degree of self-understanding is measured. Much later, after his return to Diosso, the scene resurges in his mind, as he finds himself aimlessly watching the cockroaches running up and down the walls of their home. Directionless, his life an endless

compromise, even his faith in the strengthening presence of the departed spirits is in question. Are they too not like the cockroach that tomorrow may be eaten by the rooster? Events seem to confirm the powerlessness of Prosper actively to control his destiny; his marriage to Malila, undertaken on the advice of Sophie, does nothing to fill the emptiness of his life. And then, inexplicably, Malila dies. Again, in retrospect the cockroaches seem to have been a bad omen.

The third significant reference to the cockroach proverb is made once again in the context of a bad dream but this time it is Prosper who awakens from a nightmarish world filled with people who have some sort of influence over his life. Lying awake and reflecting on his nightmare, Prosper regrets that the Governor General Félix Eboué does not understand the potential power of a whole legion of cockroaches in the face of a single hen, no matter how voracious she may be.

The political overtones are here explicit and this marks the beginning of Prosper's active commitment. He slowly assumes a leading role in meetings and is chosen by the local branch of the party to represent it. In fact, Prosper is gradually coming to accept that, although life is "frémissante, grossière, affolante", by committing himself to a

course of action he is no longer searching, hesitantly, for a sense of direction. He has a long way to go and his path, which unfolds across Les phalènes, is strewn with failure, uncertainty and disillusion. But in the process he arrives at some sort of understanding of the human condition. His may well be a lost cause - how can a cockroach ever hope to win against the hen? Are the weak capable of prodigies? Indeed no - but one commits oneself all the same.

It has already been noted in Chapter Four that tne original title of this extended epic tale was to have been Les étapes d'un devenir and that Prosper's search for understanding and identity is taken up by the Judge Poaty and his son Gaston in Ces fruits si doux de l'arbre à pain. What is of significance here is the way in which a recurrent ideo-image such as that of the cockroach marks the stages of that "becoming", giving form and pattern to the narrative and so sustaining it over its slow and often labyrinthine development.

The cockroach proverb makes a last appearance in Les phalènes. It comes to mind as Prosper listens to Pambault and his friends discussing enthusiastically the promised end of *l'indigénat*. He has the feeling that there is something of the mirage, of chasing straws in the wind, in all this talk of the

l'indigénat but he holds his peace. "Ce n'est pas dans sa nature de voir tout en noir. Décidément." (74)

As the structuring potential of the cockroach image is exhausted, other ideo-images assume the role. The fact that the cockroach appears both in the title to one of the novels and also in a proverb, gives it a particular resonance. This is not typical of other ideo-images, which are introduced more unobstrusively and whose role as signifiers is more ambiguous. One such ideo-image is *la robe charleston* which opens Les phalènes.

There is nothing to indicate that the description of the full-skirted dress serves any other purpose than to set the scene; Poto-Poto in the fifties, teeming with life, music and dance; a society in the throes of social and political ferment, with a sense of euphoria at the promise of the abolition of the *l'indigénat*. The sleeveless charleston dress, free of restricting corsets, is the perfect accompaniment to the intoxicating rhythm of *la biguine* or the rumba. Gradually however, the frequent recurrence of the image focusses attention on it and then a specific reference to its symbolic value alerts the reader to the fact that it is an important signifier:

> On parle de la robe charleston... vous en parlez... tout le monde en parle comme d'une grande personne. Tout le monde, les femmes, tu veux dire. Comme d'une personne. Dis

> plutôt, comme d'un événement. Un événement qui ne vieillit pas, ne prend pas de rides, qui ne passe pas. Mais on ne sait de quoi elle est le symbole. On ne sait pas qu'elle signifie l'évasion. On ne reviendra plus à la nudité d'antan. Qu'on s'invente la pudeur. Qu'on est un peu iconoclaste contre ce que le corps était - pour ce que le corps doit paraître - paraître, pas d'autre mot. C'est pourquoi on s'étourdit à perdre haleine à parler de la robe charleston. (28-29)

All the essential elements which make up this ideo-image are hinted at here. The charleston dress represents *le métissage* of the Congo people, the invasion of the Franco-European culture which has replaced many traditional ways, in the same way that French Christian names such as Marie, Félicité, Jeanne have replaced Congolese names. Furthermore, it represents an escape from present realities; it provides a means of avoiding critical issues. This notion is developed a little later:

> La robe charleston n'a jamais cessé d'être à la mode, c'est sa vogue qui revient après l'éclipse... Toutes les autres modes passent. C'est-à-dire les grands sujets de conversation qui ont tenu tout le monde en haleine, qui ont bouleversé les habitudes... L'indigénat, le travail forcé. Hop là! on n'en parle plus. Des vieilles histoires. Il n'y a que les élections qui ressemblent un peu à la robe charleston quand revient le temps d'en parler, de se mettre en campagne et de les faire, de les gagner; qui ne tuerait pas père et mère dans la passion qui aveugle, rallume d'anciens instincts de sauvagerie? (97-8)

Prosper's disillusionment at the relativity of all things confirms and reinforces the ironic vision that the cockroach proverb had introduced.

As a temporal marker, the charleston dress has an even more important structural role. By a process of symbiosis, it collapses the notion of chronological time, which in turn reflects the temporal dynamics of the narrative. The charleston dress is an anachronism; it is the relic of a fashion dating back to the thirties. It represents a memory; Sophie will not wear it or cannot remember having worn it. She says often: "Moi, je ne veux que me souvenir du présent. Le coeur lourd me donne des vertiges." (Les phalènes 16) And yet in Poto-Poto and Bacongo, the dress is timeless.

Having been the dominant image of the first half of the narrative, the charleston dress disappears from view and then reappears at the end, with the return of Taty Loutard. The reader is referred back to the opening scenes where, at the party given at Prosper's home for Taty Loutard on the eve of his departure, Pambauld le Débonnaire first introduced Jeanne, his "perle de Kin". From the first page, the dress had been associated with the fascinating and sensual Jeanne, although at that point Jeanne was only one of several names. It is Jeanne who is largely responsible for the moral and physical collapse of Pambauld le Débonnaire. Jeanne's betrayal of

Pambauld is significant, for in his distraught state, Pambauld in turn betrays Prosper. By bringing the narrative to a full circle, the dress ideo-image marks temporal progression and at the same time destroys chronological time. Furthermore, in creating a form of cyclic eternity, it shows the relative insignificance of the events that intervene between Taty's departure and his return. The ontological implications contained in this ideo-image are clear: reality is transient and difficult to grasp hold of, for one's perceptions of it are determined by the constant mutations of time and place.

It is with this last reference to the charleston dress that the structural role of the ideo-image crystallises. In retrospect, it can be seen to inform both the temporal and the thematic structures of the narrative, marking the circular development not of the action but of the imaginary and mental universe.

The complex and fluid patterns of correspondences that are built up by the ideo-images create a sense of homogeneity within U Tam'Si's creative discourse. At this point it is necessary to make a distinction between the notion of homogeneity and that of "organic unity", by which all parts relate to the whole. Organic unity is an important criterion in the Western tradition of literary criticism but it cannot be usefully applied to U Tam'Si's fiction. Of more

relevance is another concept, that of harmony within diversity. This notion is better understood when set in the context of African ontology and here valuable insight can be had from a discussion recorded by Théophile Obenga in La cuvette congolaise.[7] Mwene Alomba, an old Mbochi, explains his philosophical understanding of being. In Mwene Alomba's words, a thing can exist without having to manifest itself: its virtual existence constitutes its absolute totality. But man perceives reality as a system of relations. "Les divers aspects de la réalité sont reliés et se conditionnent mutuellement." Moreover, "la façon d'être" of a being is different from its reality: the "façon d'être" of a woman dancing is temporary, her reality resides in her femininity. Her possible or potential "façons d'être" are infinite. This dynamic synthesis of permanence and change constitutes absolute totality. The elements of the existential world exist in a state of relativity.

> Comparer n'est nullement opposer ni juxtaposer, encore moins poser côte à côte les faits de la comparaison, mais les rapprocher en discernant ce qui les rend proches les uns des autres et ce qui, en même temps, les rend distincts les uns par rapport aux autres au sein de la totalité englobante. (La cuvette 147)

U Tam'Si himself expresses much the same idea in his introduction to Légendes africaines. In defense

of his refusal to provide an anthology of tales classified according to theme he says:

> Toute chose classée, me semble-t-il, perd toute l'énergie qu'elle gagne en puissance d'être intimement laissée au contact des autres choses. (18)

It is this sense of the profound interconnectedness of all aspects of the existential world that is mirrored in U Tam'Si's highly integrated creative writing. Such a holistic approach to life stands in contrast to the manichean Western world view.

The analysis of the ideo-images' structuring function highlights a narrative technique that U Tam'Si develops and uses with great skill. The ideo-images do not operate in a linear or logically ordered fashion. They are determined by a poetic logic that functions by association and correspondence. The complex interplay of these ideo-images creates a densely textured discourse which is also highly structured. This patterning was consciously fashioned, as is clear from U Tam'Si's own words. Speaking of his poetry, he said:

> Les cinq recueils que j'ai écrits sont complémentaires comme les cinq doigts de la main. Je me suis donné au départ des thèmes, j'ai créé un climat. Puis il m'arrive d'avoir l'attention attirée par une image. Cette image, je la transfère dans un autre poème. Il y a donc passage et

> progression d'un poème à l'autre. En partant d'un matériau brut, anarchique et baroque, j'en arrive ainsi à une oeuvre très structurée. Mais j'ai l'impression que je ne me suis donné, jusqu'à présent, qu'un lexique à partir duquel je vais pouvoir créer librement - comme si je me trouvais au début de ma véritable aventure poétique![8]

These remarks apply to his creative works as a whole which, on careful reading, reveal a remarkable degree of coherence in terms of both thematic concerns and poetic idiom or mythology.

It has been said that U Tam'Si's poetry and fiction are integrally related and mutually illuminating. To illustrate the way in which ideo-images that have been developed in the poetry inform the prose, *le fleuve* and *la mer* can be isolated. These ideo-images are themselves closely interrelated.

Significantly, *le fleuve* is not any river but a river which runs into the sea. At a first reading, it is easy to understand how the image of *le fleuve* would be dominant in the consciousness of the Congolese people, for the great Congo river is both a source of food and a vital means of transport. It is also a powerful natural element that can easily destroy those who venture out on it in a flimsy *pirogue*.

Théophile Obenga's explanation of some traditional poem-songs gives valuable insight into another metaphysical dimension of *le fleuve*. The river is believed to be the source of *génies* and also

the original home of twins, themselves of mythological significance and thought to bring happiness. In a particularly beautiful traditional poem-song, *le piroguier*, who understands the mysteries of the water and is responsible for carrying people safely across the water, helps the twins to escape from the binding rushes. In so doing he brings them into life, out of the primordial waters where they originate.

In U Tam'Si's poetry, *le fleuve* and *la pirogue* are closely related. To the layers of traditional ontological connotation contained by these two images, he adds his own personal meaning. *Le fleuve*, and in particular the Congo River, symbolises not only life but also generosity, the total giving of self, poetic inspiration, the flow of words, the Verb. *Le piroguier*, or *le pagayeur*, shows the direction. Without him one is lost:

> mes deux mains autour du fleuve
> cela faisait une bonne écuelle
> mais où a-t-on égaré mes pagayeurs
> (Feu de brousse 86)

Their presence symbolises hope and an affirmation of life:

> l'eau du fleuve chantait
> penchant la tête des piroguiers
> de poupe en proue (Feu de brousse 99)

Only by exploring the traditional culture of a particular writer is it possible to appreciate the multiple levels of meaning contained in such complex images. For a non-Vili, there will probably always remain unexplained elements in U Tam'Si's discourse, just as no reader can fully penetrate the poet's individual poetic imagination.

La mer, which is closely associated with the *le fleuve*, attains its fullest connotative powers in the collection Feu de brousse. The sea is a source of hope and inspiration; by throwing himself into the sea, the poet commits himself to his people and to his poetic vocation.[9] In the face of the sea's immensity and the fascination of its regular rhythm, one is made aware of one's solitude and one's mortality. The sea bed, with its store of plant and animal life, mirrors the depths of the human consciousness. As a primeval element, the sea is the source of all life; U Tam'Si often uses the expression "la mer en gésine." It is the salt in the sea water that gives it its savour and in U Tam'Si's poetic idiom, salt is associated with the notions of vitality, active engagement and the potential grandeur of human beings: "le sel me rend savoureux à moi-même." (98) In Arc musical, the sea and salt signify rest and regeneration:

> J'aime tellement la mer
> quand elle se repose
> du tumulte de ses abysses

que je comprends mal
qu'on la chansonne à tort. (117-18)

And yet the sea is treacherous; it is by the sea that the slave ships arrived:

mais non
avant la mer
monte l'écume
à la gorge
du fleuve
écoutez le tocsin
congo
(Feu de brousse 87)

It was by the sea too, that the colonising forces arrived: in U Tam'Si's play Le Zulu, "l'écume de la mer" is a key image presaging the domination of the Zulu people by the White man.[10] So it is that the notion of refusal and revolt is contained in the sea symbol:

bras et corps poings levés!
corps et âmes poings levés!
des gens, poitrail au vent,
sortent leur corps du silence des nuits,
pour le battre contre l'écume
ceux qui étaient sans pitance ont un chemin"
(A triche-coeur 126)

Turning now to U Tam'Si's prose, as may be expected the sea is a dominant ideo-image in Les méduses ou Les orties de mer. In U Tam'Si's own words: "La mer est porteuse d'une richesse insoupçonnable, et puis aussi de méduses. Ces méduses

sont les témoins de la rencontre de mes trois personnages."[11] The role of the sea as the catalysing agent in the meeting of the three men and its thematic importance is made quite specific in the text:

> 'On se souviendra toujours comment on s'est rencontré, dit Muendo.' Ça, c'est vrai. On dira quand on s'est rencontré, il y avait des méduses partout; à cause des paroles d'un fou qui se prenait pour un prêtre!.'
>
> Est-ce que cette rencontre, dans ces circonstances donnait une explication du coma de Luamba? (80-1)

The three friends meet regularly on the beach, [illegible] their lunch break or after work. In contrast [illegible] heavy, stifling atmosphere in Luambu's office, [illegible] is filled with suspicion and unexplained foreboding, it is pleasantly cool next to the sea and there is always a movement of air. Luambu comes to the beach to reflect, to try to see more clearly the sense of his confused existence. He meditates aloud to Elenga:

> Nous disons: 'L'eau de sel', les Vilis disent: 'Mbou!' C'est par le bruit que fait la mer qu'ils nomment la mer. C'est une rumeur ressassée de toute éternité, peut-être depuis la nuit des temps. Le temps vient de la nuit. La nuit a mis au monde le temps, un matin! Avec les étoiles, la lune. Le soleil et le temps sortent de la nuit. (32)

However, his words are not understood by Elenga, in whose eyes Luambu is a philosopher and something of a sorcerer-prophet.

Later, shocked and grieving at the death of Elenga, Luambu seeks refuge on the beach: "le tumulte des vagues ne peut rien contre les maux d'une âme en lambeaux. Mais il y a l'iode." (166-7) The sea contains iodine, an antiseptic agent that is essential to life and which heals. Again, after hearing of the gruesome death of Muendo at the sawmills, Luambu turns to the sea, trying to chase away the spectre of death by the sensual images of sexuality and fertility that the waves suggest:

> Pour ne pas enliser ses pas dans le sable, il faut marcher vite. Luambu s'essouffla et s'effondra sur le sable. Face à la mer, ses tumultes intérieurs devenaient dérisoires. De même le sable est calme face à la mer qui infiniment s'agite, rue, ahane, feule, mord, grignote, lape, suce, bave, râle, s'énerve de ne pouvoir parfaire un orgasme dont l'attente lui déchire interminablement les entrailles. Quelle hanche, quelle cuisse, quel ventre de femme n'a jamais eu le velouté de la vague qui vient lentement lascive, qui s'irise effervescente, se ramasse le dos arrondi, fond sur le plaisir qui la disloque. Parfait, parfait! Je suis ce vieillard agonisant que la vue d'une vierge ravive! Il se lève. S'il chasse la mort, la vie tiendra encore le bon bout. (221)

Of less obsessive significance in the other novels, the sea is nevertheless part of the symbolic fabric of the entire epic. In Les cancrelats, for example, Juliette went to visit her uncle, who lived

at Pointe-Noire and there the sea made a deep impression on her.

> Oui, c'est là-bas que tout arriva, à Pointe-Noire. La mer avait surpris et éclaboussé Juliette de son écume saline et lumineuse. Elle restait devant la mer des heures et des heures, perplexe et ahurie. Elle avait décidément les yeux trop grands ou les paupières trop étroites. (239)

And it is here, beside the sea, that Juliette met Prosper. Was it a presage that, on her last day, when she went to collect a little sea water in a bottle to take back home with her, a crab pinched her toe and she had to limp to the train?

Only when read in the context of U Tam'Si's creative writing as a whole does the full significance of "son écume saline et lumineuse" become clear. This is not simply a visual representation of the salty foam, reflecting the bright sunlight. Juliette is at a decisive point in her destiny; the sea awakens her to full womanhood, prepares her for her meeting with Prosper and the joy and the pain that that union will bring. The symbolic function of the shining, salt waves is distilled in the poem entitled "Le corps", written many years later.[12]

The sea ideo-image illustrates in a striking way the remarkable homogeneity of U Tam'Si's symbolic universe. The patterning of cross-reference and correspondence, whereby the poetry informs the prose

and *vice versa*, is one of the most distinguishing characteristics of his creative writing.

However, this poetic "lexique", as U Tam'Si referred to it, makes considerable demands upon the reader, which is one of the reasons why his writing, particularly his poetry, is found by many to be difficult, even hermetic.

For the Western reader in particular, who is not familiar with the Vili or Congolese context, U Tam'Si's multi-dimensional, at times esoteric, imagery seems to defy rational explanation and this has led to parallels being drawn with the poetry of the French surrealists. A closer look at this critical opinion will illustrate clearly the shortcomings of the comparative or intertextual approach, often practised by Western critics.[13] Furthermore, it will help focus on the specificity of U Tam'Si's poetic discourse.

A paper given by Gerald Moore at a symposium on French language literature, held in Dakar in 1963, provides an appropriate basis for the discussion.[14] Moore's paper was entitled "Surréalisme et négritude dans la poésie de Tchicaya U Tam'Si," and in it he suggests that U Tam'Si's imagery is at times more surrealist than that of the surrealists:

> Et dans le passage le plus frénétique du poème ... il crée un tableau étrange et sauvage, dont les rangées de 'derrières fourbus' suggèrent

> Courbet, mais dont les autres éléments auraient scandalisé Salvador Dali. (242)

Athough Moore makes a fine, sensitive reading of several poems, his assessment of U Tam'Si's poetry is grounded on a mistaken premise and this in turn leads to the "surrealist" interpretation which he gives to U Tam'Si's poetic discourse.

Moore begins with the assertion that: "Tchicaya est un témoin dont l'unique but, ici, est de manifester la *Négritude*." This runs counter to evidence from U Tam'Si's writing and to his expressed views. However, at the end of the paper it becomes clear that Moore gives a very wide definition to *négritude*:

> Le décor poétique d'U Tam'si, les matériaux de son imagination, toute sa sensibilité, la musique même de sa vie, c'est l'Afrique qui leur a donné forme. Jusqu'à ce point, nous pouvons certainement parler de Négritude. Et jusqu'à ce point précisément, nous pourrions parler de l'Anglitude de Shakespeare out de la Francitude de Racine. (249)

Moore clearly confuses *négritude* with *africanité* or the "African mind". Nevertheless, it is important to understand his definition of *négritude*, since it represents the essence of his argument. Moore states that U Tam'Si's expression of his "Africanness" is, unlike that of the Negritude poets Damas or Diop, "absolument pas didactique", just as, "de par sa

nature même, le Surréalisme ne peut être didactique." This clears the way for asserting that U Tam'Si was inspired by, amongst other things, "la technique et l'exemple du surréalisme." (249)

It is important to examine more closely this assertion. The surrealists, as Moore explains, used poetry as a means of liberatic . They sought to free both language and thought from the constraints of conventional speech and mind patterns. They deliberately tried to disconcert the reader by inhabitual or even shocking imagery as well as the arbitrary juxtaposition of words or images that had no apparent logical association.

In fact, nothing could be more different from U Tam'Si's poetic discourse. Careful investigation of the context which inspires his poetry shows that apparently hermetic images derive from concrete elements of the poet's cultural heritage, both traditional and modern. U Tam'Si himself frequently said, in refutation of the view that his poetry is difficult, "les clés sont là." It is the responsibility of the reader and critic to see them. His richly connotative ideo-images do not derive from the free association of elements within a private, intensely subjective *imaginaire*. They are grounded in a real, referential world which is part of a collective experience. His poetry builds upon a

coherent scheme of reference and in this it differs fundamentally from that of the surrealists.

Nor does U Tam'Si seek deliberately to shock the reader. He explores every possible resource of language and image to express his own suffering and also his profound and passionate identification with the suffering of Africa, more particularly, of the Congo. His overriding concern is not to destroy or liberate or change the world but to understand, both himself and his world.

Moore's reading of U Tam'Si's poetry in terms of Western parameters has the effect of excluding other important criteria. This inevitably limits the elucidation of the text. It is unfortunate that Moore does not follow more carefully the clues given by Senghor. He says:

> ... je trouve difficile de suivre M. Senghr quand il proclame que le style d'U Tam'Si s'inspire beaucoup de la tradition poétique bantoue. Le champ indiqué me parait (sic) un peu trop vaste et trop vague pour permettre d'utiles comparaisons. (247)

Yet Moore goes on to discuss the enigmatic juxtaposition of images in Yoruba poetry, with which he is familiar; how much more illuminating this avenue of enquiry would have been than to have followed the surrealist path.

U Tam'Si himself gives further insight into the true sources of his poetic *imaginaire*:

> Allez dans les villages et écoutez parler les gens, vous verrez qu'ils parlent par paraboles, par proverbes, par images. Ce sont les images qui parlent chez nous où le verbe n'est pas une structure grammaticale mais plutôt une structure par échos. Quand je dis "mangue", vous voyez un enfant qui mange une mangue, vous voyez un manguier, ou un paysage où il y a un manguier, etc. Tous ces signifiants sont reconstitués par le lecteur. C'est-à-dire que quand j'écris, je ne raconte pas, je ne vous mâche pas la nourriture. Je vous dis: 'Voilà', et selon les habitudes que vous avez acquises, vous pouvez prendre plus ou moins.[15]

This echoes the much-debated Senghorien theory of the "analogical image". According to Senghor: "Il suffit de nommer la chose pour qu'apparaisse le **sens** sous le **signe**. Car tout est signe et sens en même temps pour les Négro-Africains...."[16] Furthermore, to name a thing is to give concrete expression to a moral, vital force.

Senghor was among the first to recognise the poetic genius of U Tam'Si, whom he hailed as one of the most authentically "negro-African" poets, close to the source of pure African inspiration and expression.[17] It would be wrong to pursue too far this attempt to define U Tam'Si's writing in terms of its "Africanness" since, as it has already been seen, U Tam'Si disassociated himself from Senghor's negritude philosophy. Nevertheless, it is undeniable

that U Tam'Si's representation of the natural world differs fundamentally from that of Western writers.

In his poetic and fictional universe, the interplay between man and the forces of nature is a constant. For example, the heavy, grey sky that precedes a storm, foreshadows the announcement to Prosper of his father's death; the deserted beach with its air of "une fin de monde" contains a dreadful message, which will be understood by Luambu only when he learns that Elenga has been shot. Yet the natural elements are not a reflection of the protagonist's or the poet's emotive or spiritual state, in the way that Rousseau and the Romantics portray nature as an expression of the "I". Natural elements - the sea, the sun, the rain - are an integral part of the human drama.

A striking illustration of this is found in Les méduses. Political tension had led to Malonga's prudent decision that his nephew Elenga's death should be mourned in silence. However, the frogs defied the interdiction and provided a deafening funeral chant.

> On eût dit que, de part et d'autre de la route qui va au Plateau, il y avait deux choeurs de batraciens et de reptiles leurs cousins qui cette nuit-là montrèrent aux vivants comme aux morts, comment on pleure un enfant, ho! Un enfant, pas un homme, oh! Les chiens errants aussi vinrent et hurlèrent. Les moustiques aussi. (40)

The personnification of the animal world does not derive from a literary conceit; it is a concrete expression of the way in which the forces of nature interact dynamically with the lives of human beings.

In Les cancrelats, the night, the wind and the rain combine in an unrelenting attack against the newly orphaned Prosper, as he falls to his knees in the cemetery.

> Le ciel de suie, sombre à l'horizon, ramène la nuit. La nuit tombée inexorable. Elle réveille le vent qui bâille, s'étire les membres, puis lance de tous côtés des coups de boutoir. Le vent assomme l'enfant. L'enfant chancelle. L'enfant s'abat contre le sol, sans bruit. La croix, au bout de la tombe, tressaille. Des arabesques courent le long de l'horizon, puis, là-bas, sur la mer, craquent dans le ciel noir. La nuit perd ses derniers scrupules. Ahanant comme sur un lit d'amour, obscène, la pluie en profite, s'acharne sur la terre des orphelins. La nuit frémit de plaisir! Quand elle en prend à ses aises, elle ne se mêle pas d'être hypocrite, oh ça, non! (81)

The voracious sexuality of the imagery likens the rapport between Prosper and the elements to that of an abortive mother-child relationship. Again, reference to U Tam'Si's poetry is illuminating:

> Ta terre te refoule
> t'a vendue haut la houle
> Ah! crève donc de rage!
>
> Dans chaque lit on voit
> ta mère ivre en rut pouaf!
> le démon la croit sage. (Mauvais sang 22)

These lines are remarkably reminiscent of the prose passage, illustrating once again the coherence of U Tam'Si's discourse; one finds the same aggressively sexual imagery and the same synonomy of the earth and the mother. Both are guilty of betrayal and the earth, like the mother, is shown to participate actively in the physical and spiritual life of its progeny.

Another passage from Les cancrelats reveals a further dimension in the rapport between nature, human beings and their destiny. Prosper, manacled and thrown into the militia men's truck, is driven across the Ntandu Pundji plain:

> Ntandu Pundji vit et entendit tout cela avec un oeil et une oreille indifférents. Prosper l'avait maintes fois traversée, à pied, à bécane, en camion, il ne l'avait jamais vue, jamais sentie (sic) cette chaude haleine d'une herbe humble et soumise, prostrée comme Sophie, là-bas tout à l'heure, devant la Factorerie de l'Encorné. Dieu a-t-il créé un ciel sous lequel le soleil n'est pas un fléau? Autre que celui-ci? Ntandu Pundji flétrie et vivante, mon Dieu! Il ne pouvait pas y avoir de solidarité tacite ou latente entre cette plaine et Prosper, eût-il un moment pensé à la protéger "ntòtù ngahn Kumándáh" (cette terre du Commandant)? (123)

This communion between human beings, earth and god derives from a holistic world-view that has already been discussed. Useful reference can again be made to Mwene Alomba, the Mbochi sage, who explains his understanding of the reciprocal and complementary

existence of human beings and nature. Men and women find their reality in action and by their human endeavour they conquer nature. Being the place wherein humans realise themselves, nature is humanity's reality:

> La nature dans sa totalité et son absoluité est le lieu de la vérité de l'homme, activité pratique, concrète et universelle, produisant un monde culturel qui produit l'homme lui-même pour autant que ce monde culturel soit la production de l'homme libre dans la nature.[18]

It is humanity's work within nature that is sacred, not the natural world itself and it is perilous to abuse this ontological relationship, for a violation of it demands a sacrifice. This explains many enigmatic passages in U Tam'Si's narrative, one of which serves to illustrate the point.

In Les méduses, Elenga is fascinated by trains. He works on the Congo-Océan line, the infamous railway line that was cut across the Congo to the sea, costing many thousands of lives:

> Le Congo-Océan est à sa manière un fleuve; un fleuve qui déraille parfois: Le Mayombe qui refuse l'abus, le droit de passage, qui prend son tribut de chair et de sang, sacrifice qui lui est dû en compensation du préjudice, du viol qu'on lui a fait subir à coups de dynamite. Les fleuves d'eau, de terre, de forêts et de montagnes, la mer de l'océan, tout déraille; des gouffres s'ouvrent, des vies humaines s'y abîment. L'expiation. Il y a la faute de l'homme.(135)

Was Elenga's death some sort of expiation for the colonial power's abuse of the humanity-nature relationship? And Muendo, who worked in a sawmill, where scores of trees were sawn up daily; does he by his death pay retribution for the large-scale exploitation of nature's resources?

> Partir vers une forêt de fûts, de troncs d'arbres couchés, blessés, hostiles. Des milliers de jours les ont vus debout, altiers, défiant le soleil, sanctuaires d'anciens dieux, d'anciens temps.... Partir vers cette vie tronçonnée, vers ces odeurs de bois, de chair de bois si dure, qui a résisté à tant d'ouragans! (Méduses 209-10)

Clearly, nature plays an ontological role in U Tam'Si's creative writing, interacting with the protagonists at the physical, emotional and spiritual level.

Having highlighted the natural world as the source of much of U Tam'Si's imagery, we are led on to consider the modality of the images themselves. A survey of the major ideo-images will show that they are characteristically firmly anchored in the real world. Intangible sensations and the interplay of human relations are given palpable consistency by means of concrete images. Some examples from prose will illustrate this. In the following passage from Les cancrelats, Taty senses Damien's humility and reluctance, as he would the fetid odours of a marshland:

> La voix de Taty se dégrada, se perdit dans un murmure. Le fleuve de ses paroles devint un marécage en ce terrain perméable qu'était l'humilité de Damien Ndélhu! Damien suait, fétide. Taty sentit Damien poreux, ses paroles le pénétrèrent, elles le diluaient. Puis sous l'effet corrodant du pressentiment, Damien se desséchait. Il avait l'impression que son coeur n'était guère plus gros qu'un pépin de goyave.(156)

In a scene from Les méduses, Luambu is again on the beach, this time with Mazola, Elenga's younger sister, whose love for him he resists, inhibited as he is by his memories and sense of guilt for his dead wife. For a brief moment, Mazola's youthful innocence lifts him out of his bleak despondency:

> Il se sent aussi gosse qu'elle, habité d'une fraîcheur bienfaisante. Il a une légèreté de corps. Il lévite, plus aucun de ses membres ne lui fait mal. Il a dans la poitrine un coeur aussi épais qu'un point de lumière. Il est dans les arbres. Plus agile qu'un lézard, il peut descendre à pic, la tête en bas, les parois les plus vertigineuses. Il ne voit pas d'abîme. Le fond est une remontée et dans ses mains sur un coussinet de mousse, il tient un charbon où veille un point de feu. C'est la braise que l'on gardait vive lors des migrations, des exodes d'antan. (Méduses 139)

The rapid succession of visual and tactile images, drawn as they so often are, from the natural world, create a kaleidescope of impressions, reflecting the conflicting emotions that invade Luambu.

At times the earthy humour of an image, explicit in its crude reality, reflects the vigorous, self-mocking irony that is a constant in U Tam'Si's

writing. Here the attempt to banish from one's mind an unwelcome idea, is likened to chasing a duck:

> ... la pensée qu'il veut fuir revient avec entêtement ... c'est comme le canard, tu le chasses, il fiente de peur en s'éloignant! tu as honte de la frayeur que tu lui as donnée, le pauvre canard! Le pauvre? tu parles! Ruse de canard, oui, car le voilà qui revient de son pas appuyé, se souciant peu de tes états d'âme! hé! va-t'en! tu lui cours après, eh merde! eh oui! le pied dans sa fiente, tu en as plein dans les orteils. Tu chasses, tu plains, tu maudis ... (Phalènes 243)

U Tam'Si's fellow Congolese writer, Sony Labou Tansi, crystallises in his own way this manner of expressing abstract concepts through the prism of the real world. "Pour moi, l'imaginaire ne peut être que dans la réalité vue au microscope de la sensibilité."[19]

U Tam'Si's ideo-images function by the non-explicited association of ideas. Often an image will be no more than a fleeting, impressionistic touch, easily missed at a first reading. Its wider connotations and thematic value may become apparent only upon successive reappearances in the text. An example of this is the play on white and black in Les cancrelats. The scene is the crowded mission church on Easter Sunday; all are there to witness the first Communion of the mission children. The girls are dressed in white. The black priest, Abbé Stanislas,

is officiating, which scandalises the honoured guest, Chartriant, the French Administrator. As yet, the racial implications are merely suggested. It is the final image of the passage that crystallises the essence of this and the preceding scene.

> L'abbé René posait ses doigts **noirs** sur **l'ivoire** des claviers de l'harmonium, et ils couraient comme des vagues sur un sable sonore. Quelle fraîcheur! (60) (emphasis added)

The play on white and black, acting as positive and negative signifiers, creates an ironic perspective and at the same time, reflects the complexity of racial attitudes in this small Congolese settlement, which is a microcosm of colonial Africa.

The image of the black hands on the ivory piano keys illuminates the scene immediately preceding that of the Communion servic sitting on the beach, the youthful Prosper expounds to his confused and frightened cousin what it means to belong to a damned race. Prosper is still fervently devout, under the influence of the mission fathers, and for him Easter represents his only salvation. Taking his Communion will not only ensure his place in heaven but also: "Je serai blanc, dit Prosper en ramenant ses bras sur son coeur en toute humilité." (58) The poor, incredulous Taty is overwhelmed by this revelation, he who had witnessed the death of an aunt - an aunt who had

remained well and truly black! The humour of the episode alleviates the sting of the irony and the implications are left implicit. The scene then changes abruptly to that of the mission church at Easter. It is only in retrospect that the full import of the black-white interaction becomes apparent.

A close look at the hand ideo-image will serve as a further illustration of the way in which, as it appears in different contexts, an image gathers layers of meaning until it acquires the status of a complex symbol, signifying simultaneously at many different levels. Some examples from U Tam'Si's poetry will illustrate the importance of the hand image:

> Nous étions Elle et moi que mains et paupières
> (Mauvais sang 38)

> sur les deux rives
> d'autres fleuves viennent
> ainsi tiennent les doigts
> à la main tendue les veines
> au coeur humide
> mais eux ils n'ont pas su attendre
> que leur tende de moi-même la main
> de moi-même j'aurais su verser mon sang
> pour qu'ils vivent heureux chez eux
> (Feu de brousse 86)

> La main en guise de truelle
> Et le sel en guise de liant
> pour que l'édifice du corps soit défi
> à la hideur grave du tocsin
> (Veste d'intérieur 80)

> La main qui ne répond pas pousse au suicide.
> (Notes de veille 108)

La main joins people together, unites them in a fraternal bond and, as a symbol of love, offers a means of resisting mortality.

In the following passage from Les cancrelats, *la main* is a key image:

> Si seulement Juliette lui avait dit, ne serait-ce que murmuré: "Tu es un homme", sans même ajouter de superlatif, Prosper aurait été dans la vie une main et non une peau de tam-tam. Une main prime. Sa main ne primait pas. Prosper partout se taisait ou répondait par monosyllabes. Qui ne souffrirait pas de veulerie à force d'être inutile à la vie des uns et des autres? On vivait d'instincts pouilleux, mutilés, muselés, brimés, sans importance si ce n'est que dans la dérision! Nkondi aurait peut-être fini par lui apprendre comment devenir une main qui prend, qui donne, qui se ferme, qui cogne, qui s'offre ... qui décide. Un homme qui ne décide pas ... est malade. (276)

Prosper, still at the beginning of his long and painful quest for identity, has reached a crucial moment of self-understanding: it is only in action that one gives meaning to one's existence. Moreover, an act is only meaningful when it affirms and reinforces the bond between oneself and one's fellows. By committing oneself to a cause and thereby recognising human fraternity, one fulfils one's potential. The importance of the hand ideo-image is firmly established and it reverberates within the text each time it appears, be it in passing or explicitly referred to, as in the following scene from Les

phalènes. Sophie gives a lesson to her nephew Paulin on the intimate complexity of family relationships according to Vili custom:

> Sophie se répète par affection pour Juliette sa belle-soeur (chez nous on dit: sa femme). Juliette est la femme de Sophie, puisque Sophie est le père au féminin de Léa et de Paulin, Sophie n'est donc pas la tante de Léa et de Paulin, c'est la soeur de Juliette qui est leur tante (si Juliette a une soeur), c'est-à-dire leur mère en fait, tu as compris Paulin? toi qui apprends à l'école, il faut que tu apprennes cela, ce n'est pas pour rien que chez nous la main et la famille c'est le même mot qui les désigne. (16-17)

Given the ambiguous nature of the Prosper-Sophie-Juliette relationship, the significance of this passage is evident and the hand image serves to accentuate it.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the ideo-image in U Tam'Si's poetic and novelist discourse, is its dialectical nature and the contradictory forces that it releases. This is reminiscent of the idea developed by Gilbert Durand in Figures mythiques et visages de l'oeuvre.[20] Durand speaks of the dialectical tension that releases the dynamic energy of figurative expression. The connotative power of the image or symbol lies in what he calls its "synthèse opératoire" of opposing forces.

The way in which positive and negative forces are contained in the same image is particularly evident in U Tam'Si's writing, where elliptical, metonymic expression concentrates a multiplicity of elements within a single signifier. To illustrate this, a brief look may be taken at the Christ symbol. The dynamics of this dialectical ideo-image are inseparable from its thematic significance and themes that have aready been introduced in Chapter Four will be taken up again here, this time to draw out the fundamental ambiguity which characterises U Tam'Si's *imaginaire*.

The full dialectic of the Christ figure becomes apparent if its development is viewed retrospectively. In the last collection of poems, La veste d'intérieur, the poem "Le tombeau d'U" is particularly pertinent on account of the refrain that shapes it:

> A Pâques je ne pus rompre le pain qui leva
> Un ventre refusa de traduire mon amour en chair
> (69)

Easter, with its connotations of the betrayed and martyred Christ, represents conflicting forces in U Tam'Si's poetic universe. Ambiguity surrounds the concept of Christ the Redeemer, who died for the sins of humankind. Traditionally, the concept of sin has no place in African metaphysics. Furthermore, the colonial church is seen as having used its teachings

of Christ the martyr as a means of deceiving the African peoples. The irreverent, even sacrilegious imagery of U Tam'Si's early poetry clearly expresses his rejection of the way in which the sacred concept of sacrificial blood has been manipulated: "le Christ est un fétiche à clous," he says in Le mauvais sang. Moreover, while the betrayed Christ represents the martyrdom of Africa, he is a false martyr. Christ, Africa, should have revolted:

> le christ m'a trahit
> en se laissant trouer la peau
> qui voulait qu'on fît la preuve de sa mort
> (Feu de brousse 74)

U Tam'Si castigates those who passively allow themselves to be dominated and exploited:

> Christ trahi voici ma croix humaine de bois
> Je dansais quand le voleur est entré chez moi
> Est-ce raison de danser toujours sans raisons?
> (Mauvais sang 33)

Yet, as has already been seen, thematically the Christ figure represents suffering and self-sacrifice, the total commitment of oneself to an ideal or to a cause.

An understanding of the image of the breaking of bread at Easter is incomplete without reference to U Tam'Si's fourth collection of poetry, Le ventre, where Lumumba is depicted as the Messiah who will

unite the Kongo and who, like Christ, is betrayed by his own people. This idea is developed and reappears frequently in his later poetry:

> (j'imagine le soldat romain
> du bout de sa lance
> tendant les lèvres de Marie-Madeleine
> à la bouche de Christ
> le dernier mot est le seul secret
> que j'ai de lui: c'est raté!)
> C'est fade! Tout est à recommencer
> (Veste d'intérieur 68)

Agape, the shared communion of bread and wine, symbolising the universal fraternity, is a frequently recurring image in U Tam'Si's work. It represents a vision of love which enables the leader, the poet, the person, to face the reality of solitude, deception and death. In Le tombeau d'U, the poet is unable to break the bread; Christ's rising from the dead is not re-enacted and the barren poet is unable to translate his love into tangible form.

Christ and the ambiguous role of the Christian church in the Congo, if not in Africa as a whole, are important elements of the world in which Prosper and his successors play their part in U Tam'Si's existential ep . In the novels, the dialectic lies in the inextricable mingling of Catholic dogma with traditional beliefs and popular superstition.

The Catholic church is symbolised by the Cathedral of Sainte-Anne, which was under construction in the early fifties and which dominates the entrance

into Poto-Poto. The ambiguity of the Sainte-Anne symbol is evident from the irony of the following lines:

> Cette carcasse s'appellera demain Sainte-Anne du Congo. On y viendra prier pour le pardon de Poto-Poto, et pour tous ceux qui sont morts pour avoir vécu une vie sans importance.... Demain, ils viendront implorer Sainte-Anne du Congo pour qu'elle leur épargne cette boue qui fait que, même en plein jour, un homme valide marche à tâtons sur son chemin, que c'en est une honte pour celui qui se laisse aller.... L'homme qui marche sur l'avenue, à cette heure matinale, glisse et tombe. (Cancrelats 306)

The association with mud is not unintentional: the mud of Poto-Poto pervades the narrative. It has marked the people with "une philosophie terrible et burlesque, mais une philosophie comme les autres." (Cancrelats 309) It is with these words that the novel ends. People wade in the mud, they are trapped, powerless to escape from their environment. The implications of this with respect to the colonial administration are clear. At the same time, mud represents the level of consciousness of the people:

> Ils pataugeaient dans leur conscience qui était de la vase. Et la vase, c'était leur vie. Rare d'y trouver une goutte d'eau claire. La soif de vivre au-delà de la routine, du laisser-aller.... C'est une suffocaton de plus. (Méduses 214)

The same ironical perspective illustrates the paradoxical status of the Christian faith in the minds of the people. The theme of opposing traditional and Christian beliefs, as illustrated in the person of André Sola, has already been discussed.

However, Sainte-Anne does not represent an unequivocal indictment of the Catholic Church for Sophie, who becomes a regular worshipper there, is perceived to be a holy woman, even a saint. There is an element of the martyr in her and she appears to have healing powers. Although it is not made clear to what extent her healing ability can be given a natural explanation, Sophie is clearly a deeply spiritual person, who perceives the world intuitively.

The contradictory tensions contained within the Christ and Sainte Anne images are inherent to all U Tam'Si's major ideo-images. The dialectic is an expression of his ironic vision and is fundamental to his philosophy of life. Each ideo-image embraces a positive and a negative perspective, which makes it impossible to reduce its field of reference to a simple formulation. The ideo-image's very ambiguity is a philosophical statement, for it affirms the diversity of life and U Tam'Si's refusal to categorise or to make definitive assertions. "Identifier une chose, c'est limiter ses possibilités."

Paradoxically, the final message of his entire creative writing would seem to be that there is in

fact no message; to define is to falsify and there are no simple answers to the existential questions that he raises. Luambu, the most articulate of those who are involved in the quest for understanding says:

> Le monde qu'on se fait soi-même est un mystère sur lequel il faut se taire ... sinon, il est tranchant et vous jette à terre dans la vie qui étrangle. (Méduses 57)

To realise one's human potential, one must "aller au-devant de la vie," accepting the ambiguity. The writer, the poet-martyr, crystallises in his writing and through his own experience, the anguish of a people. But he does not give answers; he has no message to convey.

U Tam'Si's writing then, represents a profound statement of the complexity, the multi-dimensioned dialectic that constitutes human existence and any attempt to categorise his imagery, to discover a neat system of equivalences can only be distortive. This refusal to define has important implications for the reader, since the open-ended, equivocal nature of his writing, in terms of both structure and imagery, calls for a pluralistic reading. His highly individual mode of expression cannot be contained within a defined literary category and the reader is required to respond creatively and imaginatively. U Tam'Si

demands an effort on the part of the reader - he himself has said that he does not "chew their food for them." The reader must respond with the same passion as the poet, for whom the act of creation is a painful, even wounding, experience. Reading is an act of creation and also discovery, the direction being indicated but not controlled by the writer.

The ideo-image as a structural and semiological signifier constitutes the dynamic essence of U Tam'Si's creative writing. As a stylistic technique it simultaneously serves as a vehicle for both his thematic concerns and also his particular *imaginaire*. It constitutes a poetic statement that is multi-dimensional in its depth and scope and yet controlled in its integrality.

NOTES

1. The notion of "structuring" refers to the broad concept of "pattern", as distinct from the specific meaning assigned to it by the structuralist school of critics.

2. For example, in A triche-coeur the title "Etiage" is introduced in the preceding poem, "Agonie". A triche-coeur 110, 107.

3. For example, "le cancrelat" appears in both Le mauvais sang and Feu de brousse. Similarly the sea is an important semiological element in Les méduses. Again it is important to take account of the chronological sequence of his writing and to remember that the novels and poetry were written contemporaneously.

4. "il reste un fleuve et la clé des songes dans ses flancs" (Feu de brousse 52)

5. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, interview, Calao 81 (mai-juin 1988).

6. In Africa the cockroach is a large, quick-moving insect with a hard, black protective "shell". It is a particularly resiliant species, difficult to eradicate from the cracks and crevasses in the house, where it hides and breeds.

7. Théophile Obenga, La cuvette congolaise, les hommes et les structures (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976) 141-54.

8. Tchicaya U Tam'si, interview, "Tchicaya U Tam'Si: entre le rire et le chant," Afrique 57 (juillet 1966) 44.

9. See in particular "A travers temps et fleuve" and "Contre-destin" Feu de brousse 51-5, 71-3.

10. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, Le Zulu (Paris: Nubia, 1977)

11. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, interview, R.F.I., October 1982.

12. See the discussion of this poem in Chapter Four.

13. See Chapter One for a general discussion of this approach to literary analysis.

14. Gerald Moore, "Surréalisme et négritude dans la poésie de Tchicaya U Tam'Si" in Colloque sur la littérature africaine d'expression française U. de Dakar, Faculté des Lettres et Sciences 26-29 mars 1963 (Maçon: imprimerie Protat-frères, 1965) 239-49.

15. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, interview, "Entretien avec Tchicaya U Tam'Si," Fraternité Matin (mardi 6 jan. 1981) 8.

16. Léopold Senghor, "Comme les lamantins vont boire à la source," Po[illegible] Paris: Seuil, 1984) 159.

17. See Senghor's Preface to the 1962 edition of Epitomé. Reprinted as "Tchicaya ou de la poésie bantoue à la poésie négro-africaine," Liberté 1 Négritude et humanisme (Paris: Seuil, 1964) 364-8.

18. La cuvette congolaise 151.

19. Sony Labou Tansi, interview, "Je ne suis pas à développer mais à prendre ou à laisser," Notre Librairie 79 (avril-juin 1985) 3.

20. Gilbert Durand, Figures mythiques et visages de l'œuvre (Paris: Berg International, 1979).

PART TWO

CHAPTER SIX

NARRATIVE DISCOURSE AND THE ORAL TRADITION

To the question "Is not tradition fixed and static?" Théodore Mayi Matip of the Cameroons replied with the proverb, "L'étang n'est pas le compagnon du fleuve." He interprets this as follows; "... si la tradition était figée, elle ne rencontrerait pas la modernité et celle-ci n'existerait pas."[1] This image of the river comes from the language of ritual, where tradition or cultural heritage, was compared to water that originates from a spring. Just as water digs its river bed, adapting itself to different climatic and geographic conditions, so too tradition adapts itself dynamically to new situations.

What is the significance of this for a modern novelist such as Tchicaya U Tam'Si? To what degree is he indebted to his traditional culture? To what extent does his writing reflect the collective consciousness of his Congolese origins?

Any attempt to answer these questions must proceed with great caution, for the concepts of "traditional culture" and "collective consciousness" are fraught with ambiguity and are open to arbitrary interpretation. Isidore Okpewho strikes a timely word of warning to scholars who have been inclined to over-emphasise the notion that the traditional story-teller

is the mouthpiece of a collective culture, while ignoring the evidence of individual, non-conformist or critical expression.[2] Furthermore, U Tam'Si himself, like so many of his fellow African writers, inherited from a dual literary tradition. Speaking of the effects of Africa's colonial history on African writer U Tam'Si said:

> le problème de l'acculturation ...c'est tout simplement le fait de perdre l'essentiel. [3]

What, in U Tam'Si's eyes, is essential? He gives some clue to this in the introduction to his 1967 collection of legends, Légendes Africaines, where he testifies to the great value that he placed on "la chose orale." In explanation of his choice of legend he says, "...leurs messages se chevauchent, se prolongent, au point de décrire une trajectoire. Cette trajectoire, c'est le destin de l'homme." (17)

It is legitimate to assume that a writer whose memory is strongly marked by the *veillées* of his early years and who values that cultural heritage so highly, will show some evidence of this in his work. To identify that essence of the traditional culture in a modern author's creative writing is a delicate operation, for it is only too easy to allow one's judgement to be influenced by established studies of the oral tradition and to fit the writer into a pre-established theoretical framework. In order to avoid

this sort of distortion, the question will be approached from the standpoint of the text itself. The starting point will therefore be the narrative, which will be read in the light of those aspects of the oral tradition that serve to illuminate the text. In this way it is hoped to clarify various stylistic features that may surprise or even shock the reader who has been nurtured in an exclusively Western literary tradition.

This investigation into the influence of traditional story-telling techniques on contemporary prose writing will begin with a brief look at the status of "the Word" in U Tam'Si's writing. Following upon this, the co-existence of different genres within the narrative will be considered; the epic, the dramatic and the lyrical. The focus on discursive features will be followed by a detailed discussion of the author-reader relationship. This is a particularly striking feature of U Tam'Si's prose writing, and it will be illuminating to look at it through the prism of "la chose orale".

I

The magical power, or the sacred, incantatory value of "le Verbe" in Africa has been noted and debated at length by Western and African linguists,

oralists and ethnologists. For an understanding of how the dynamic power of the spoken word relates to poetic discourse, it is useful to turn to the poets themselves. Novelist and playwright, Sony Labou Tansi, who is remarkable for his power of verbal invention, maintains that "la parole" is the distinctive mark of the spiritual superiority of human beings over the non-human elements of the universe.[4] Turning to U Tam'Si himself, it can be seen that from his earliest collection of poems, the poet's voice is bestowed with prophetic power. It is closely associated with the song of the bird and this image informs in particular his last collection, La veste d'intérieur. Together the the poet and the bird hold the "clé des songes"; they offer a vision of hope and life.

> Je l'ai vu transmuer
> en névé clair l'ombre
> Dieu jaloux de son âme
> tente de le confondre
> depuis Babel en vain
> car son verbe conflue
> vers l'unique désir
> d'être sel et lumière (La veste 44)

The song is often misunderstood and the singing of it is agonizing, but "la bouche est source de tout / Fais de ta parole une chair." (La veste 58)

The notion of "delirium", the evocative power of words, the exuberant delight in words themselves, puts into the correct perspective U Tam'Si's characteristic

"gratuitous" digressions. The following passage, taken from Les phalènes, illustrates the power of words used as much for their own texture as for their semantic value. Sophie, whom the explosive atmosphere of Brazzaville in the months preceding the first elections seems to fill with foreboding, is ruminating:

> Le feu brûle dans les yeux de l'enfant. Son silence est un tas de cendre grise. De floconneux monticules de cendre cachent à son regard le peu de braises encore ardentes qu'elle soupçonne tapies quelque part, au fond de son désespoir, qui est aussi fait de cette cendre lâchée dans ce tourbillon que son soupir - si profond! - a déchaîné. Survient le vague souvenir de la parabole: la vieille étoffe dont la déchirure est rapiécée de neuf d'un calicot blanc ou indigo qui emporte ce qui pouvait garantir quelque pudeur au pauvre qui s'en revêt. Il n'y a pas d'étoupe et il ne tardera pas longtemps, il ne fera pas long feu, que ce qui reste de braises rende son lot de cendre à la cendre qui envahit le peu de chance qu'a encore son désespoir de défaillir, de muer les oiseaux de l'aube en flammes ardentes, les flammes du pardon, les flammes de la rémission, celles en fiente de colombes à Pâques sur la tête des Onze, celles incrustées au flanc et aux deux mains, aux deux pieds du Sauveur, Seigneur, d'où vient ce goût de saumure, j'en compte cinq, Seigneur, sur les doigts de la main que je tends pour implorer mon pardon, oh, faites que j'aie
> plus pitié de votre douleur que de la mienne. Car je suis moins qu'une seule empreinte de tes pas, que le chemin qui te mène au supplice. (Les phalènes 28)

This passage has been quoted at length to illustrate how words are used for their tonal or sensual value, rather than for their rational meaning. Sophie's thoughts have no direct bearing on the action

at this point; the family are preparing for Taty's farewell party and subject of conversation is *la robe charleston*. However, the digression obeys a poetic logic; we descend into Sophie's mind where thoughts are expressed through the immediacy of images. When the passage is read aloud (as U Tam'Si habitually did when composing) the rhythmic repetition and the musicality create an incantatory effect. In the long, unbroken phrases, it is the key images of ashes and flames which determine the shape and progression of Sophie's thoughts. Words are repeated for their evocative power. Their meaning is open-ended and it is assumed the reader is familiar with their referential world; the parable and the statue depicting the Last Supper, complete with pigeon droppings.

The imperatives that determine the oral performance offer a valuable insight into this technique so characteristic of U Tam'Si's prose. In the words of Okpewho:

> A narration, devoid of emotional accents and usually unaccompanied by music, is apt to pursue the line of the story in a logical and undeviating order to the end. But in an oral performance the singer, observing the effect that a detail has on his audience or on his own spirits, tends to linger on that detail and exploit its affective value to the fullest.[5]

Tzvetan Todorov has noted this same distinction between literary and oral techniques, which value

respectively "la parole juste" and "la belle parole". He notes that:

> ... cette opposition entre la parole dont on dit qu'elle est juste et celle qu'on qualifie de belle, a disparu de notre société; on demande aujourd'hui, en principe, au poète de dire la vérité, on discute de la signification de ses paroles, non de leur beauté.[6]

It would seem reasonable to suggest that U Tam'Si, who himself spoke of the *veillées* of his childhood as being his first "school", should have been strongly influenced by the oral narrator's enjoyment of words and their evocative powers.

In his introduction to the Légendes africaines, U Tam'Si regrets the loss of the "exubérance et les trop riches inventions verbales de la langue parlée qui s'accommodent mal des canons de la langue écrite." (20) In his own narrative, his exuberant style succeeds in recreating the dynamics of the spoken word. The incantatory element is often strong and there are clear echoes of the language of ritual. For example, in Les cancrelats, the description of the marriage ceremony for Prosper and Malila re-enacts the dramatic celebration of life that the traditional chants and dances represent.

> Un rêve incroyable où chacun se crut appartenir à une légende sur laquelle la nuit était couchée avec désinvolture. Chacun avait retrouvé une apparence d'être vivant au regard de l'autre. L'aube dissipa

> la nuit et redonna à la poussière le droit de ternir tout ce qui avait velléité de survivre au rêve d'une nuit de noces. (194)

In Les méduses, the mourning over the death of Elenga offers one of the most striking examples of ritual in U Tam'Si's narrative. Together with traditional Vili lamentations: "Elenga-hé! miana mama, nié ké sé! Na léli yo-o, moana mama, nié ké sé! Elenga zongà to bonguisa zoto!" (182) there are enigmatic, incantatory images, incomprehensible to those unfamiliar with Vili tradition but which nevertheless, express the essence of the people's sorrow and despair.

> Le soufre, le koalin et le sang! Le rire, le soufre, le kaolin et le sang! Sang ou latérite. Pleure. Il y eut un silence comme seule la nuit des temps se soit permis une fois qu'elle dut aller à la noce du soleil et de la lune qui pour viandes et vins se promirent la chair tendre et le sang tendre de leurs progénitures, étoiles de la nuit, étoiles du jour. Promis en ripaille! Ho! ho! ho! Plus dévergondée que la lune, quelle mère d'hommes lui est comparable! Si elle lorgnait la dépouille d'Elenga... c'est sa boulimie, s'est sa boulimie... Les ogresses des légendes antérieures à ce temps-là, comme elles sont peu ogresses à côté d'elle, certes friandes que de la chair des fils du soleil..." (186)

In all four novels, the language of ritual predominates in those episodes where the protagonist departs on a quest. The thematic significance of the initiatory quest has already been discussed but from

a stylistic point of view, what is of interest is the manner in which the real world of time and space is transcended. The protagonist's spiritual journey is traced by a succession of sensory images and ambiguous references, in much the same way that the initiatory rites trace the spiritual crossing over into manhood.

This device is most fully developed in the last of the four novels, Ces fruits si doux de l'arbre à pain, where the narrative is interspersed with Mouissou recounting the legend of the king Mpouaty Ou Kala Moungou. The correspondence between "Mpouaty" and "Poaty" is clear but the link between the Mouissou episodes and the main narrative is not spelled out. The relation is established by means of suggestion and echo, like the different themes in a musical score. Mouissou's ambiguous utterances, by which she seems to comment on and anticipate the action, serve to keep constantly in mind that other dimension of existence.

U Tam'Si consciously explored the musical resources of language, working on rhythm and on alliterative resonances as he wrote. His prose, like his poetry, should be spoken aloud in order to appreciate the way in which the texture and reverberations of words reinforce the imagery and themes.

The onomatopoeic expressions which sprinkle the text and the constant use of the exclamation mark,

represent a direct transcription of every-day speech: "C'est un enfant, ho!"; "Le camion fit teuf! teuf!"; "L'eau fit 'pouaff'!"; "Hop là!" Or again, colloquial and lyrical expression interlace in the following passage, where the contorted syntax conveys Malonga's distress:

> Oui, docteur, oui, docteur. On rendit le corps, mais on prit la précaution de boucler le Village Indigène de toutes parts, on n'est jamais assez prévoyant! Oui, docteur, la veillée, au Village Indigène, pas à l'hôpital. On pleurera dans le coeur. Oui, docteur, on pleurera dans le coeur. (Méduses 183)

This passage illustrates well how the protagonist communicates on different levels simultaneously. Like the tip of an ice-berg, the respectful, almost obsequious voice of Malonga is only the surface reflection of his agonised thoughts and feelings.

In Les phalènes, Marc Mavoungou is said to speak with "une gourmandise de vocubulaire." (132). This could be applied equally well to U Tam'Si himself who, in his prose writing, manifests a sheer pleasure in the use of words, exploiting to the full their evocative power and their rich, sensorial, almost tangible, quality on his tongue.

II

Turning now to the subject of literary genres, it will be seen that, just as traditional tales contain all the elements of poetry, theatre and epic, so too U Tam'Si's narrative moves easily between these different modes.

The musical, lyrical quality of his prose is most striking. Interludes of actual song or traditional chant are few, although more frequent in Ces fruits si doux than in the earlier novels, but the text itself often reads like free verse:

> Prosper était une pirogue échouée au fond d'une mer houleuse. Prosper était une pirogue échouée sur un banc de sable. (Cancrelats 223)

These lines contain the rhythmic quality, the musical reverberations and the metaphor of verse. They constitute the fabric itself of U Tam'Si's prose. The images are not always so hauntingly beautiful:

> Ils sont tous là revenus parmi et avec les vivants qui s'imaginent un destin imputrescible, bien qu'ils aient déjà mauvaise haleine, ou plaie incurable au bas du ventre, au creux de la main! (Les méduses 186)

As in U Tam'Si's poetry, the juxtaposition of apparently unrelated images renders them, by a process

of suggestion and poetical association, mutually illuminating. *La pirogue*, *la mer*, *la mauvaise haleine*, *le ventre* and *la main* are all core ideo-images, which have an important structural and semiological function in his writing.

Another brief example illustrates how an apparent *non sequitur* obeys a logic which functions by suggestion:

> Les gens ne savent plus vivre, disait Tchiluembh, on aimerait que certaines bouches n'aient jamais raison! Tout dépend de la place que l'on se fait dans la vie. Le plancher dans la maison de Ndundu était pourri à bien des endroits. Mais puisqu'il le savait, il lui était facile d'éviter les faux pas. (Cancrelats 50)

"Tout dépend de la place que l'on se fait dans la vie" is a notion that runs through the narrative: one is responsible for one's own life and actions - one must see and avoid the pitfalls, just as Ndundu avoids the holes in the rotten planks of the floor.

Often the suggestive power of an image is left suspended, its rational significance unexplained:

> Elenga avait laissé sur la plage les poissons que le maître de pêche avait jetés au dément. Ces poissons-là, personne ne les prit. Ils furent seulement un peu grignotés par des crabes, dans la nuit qui tomba sur cette scène. (Méduses 105)

The reference to the mad preacher and his role in the initial meeting of the three friends, immediately

conjures up the tragic events that are to follow. There can be no rational connection between the fish, refused by the preacher, which only the crabs will eat, and the deaths of Elenga and Muendo. But the image obeys a poetic logic and conveys a sense of foreboding and mystery.

As the narrative progresses, the protagonists frequently move in an atmosphere of unexplained mystery, aware of supernatural forces that interrelate with the real world. This multi-dimensioned vision of life is often manifested in the form of dream-like sequences, sometimes of a nightmarish nature. In Les méduses, Luambu is sitting at his office desk, pretending to work but lost in his thoughts of Elenga's death. Thinking of Elenga, his dead wife Julienne, of Mazola and Muendo, he seems to sink deep into the black, cloying mud of a marsh. As he descends, the image changes to that of the sea. In the clear water he sees fish, he feels himself suffocating and then he seems to become himself a fish, able to breathe and swim with ease. Suddenly, he sees a man trying to hide a corpse beneath the piles of algae, drift wood, grass, sand and stones:

> C'est ça! Crie ton innocence! Ne crie pas! Ne crie pas! Luambu se réveilla sur ce cauchemar, hypnotisé par des images qui ne quittaient pas ses yeux, qui revenaient comme des bribes d'une chanson, sur laquelle on n'arrive pas à mettre les vraies paroles, celles qui donneraient à l'air qui se fredonne insidieusement en vous, un sens moins tragique! (217)

The sea images of this passage are strongly reminiscent of U Tam'Si's poetry. One extract, taken from La veste d'intérieur, will suffice to illustrate this:

> La mer à fond d'abysses est reposante
> Or j'allais en pèlerinage vers ces abysses
> Or la mer contreversée
> les algues enlisantes
> les dédales de la loi
> le règne animal plus répréhen ible
> que jamais
> les amers s'ajoutant aux interdits
> je refais ce geste de cacique.
> Ma bouche est noire d'un tohu-bohu sanglant
> (48)

Sometimes the images in U Tam'Si'S prose have the fleeting visual effect of a verbal cameo. For example, "Il y eut des verres q estèrent suspendus entre la bouche et la table." But more often, U Tam'Si's poetical voice works by extended imagery and in order to illustrate how lyrical techniques infuse his prose writing, one rather long passage will be quoted in full. It is taken from Les méduses, at a point where Muendo has just broken the news of Elenga's death to Luambu.

> La mort venait, il ne la voyait pas. Il tirait sur l'alarme avec une désinvolture amusée et ses yeux rétrécis par le sourire lui cachaient une lumière qui avait la finesse d'une fleur qu'il eût volontiers portée au coin de la lippe ou dans sa chevelure, s'il s'était laissé aller à vouloir plaire à tout prix à ses gourgandines jamais lasses de se complaire au vice! Ah! vue malpropre! A tous ces regards qui affluent vers lui, soupçonneux,

qu'est-ce qu'il va leur promettre, le paradis pour un pet d'ange? Que ne prennent-ils pour pâture les algues que la mer leur donne. Se plaignent-ils de l'urticaire que leur donnent les méduses, que ne prennent-ils d'autres chemins que ceux qui conduisent aux abysses des mers en gésine, Dieu sait de quel mal de vivre. Se rue sur lui aussi une savane où il se voit enfant déjà perclus de sombres désirs d'habiter des mirages qui ne sont pas eaux à éteindre toute soif de vengeance! Il a, de ce côté du corps, où le bras tire l'alarme, l'excessif feu des chaudières qui lui brûle le regard. Est-ce Luambu qu'il aperçoit qui esquisse un geste de dérobade devant Mazola qui veut mordre aux jujubes de l'arbre qu'il a à chaque flanc. Muendo est une planche qui se laisse scier; il lui crie, hé! Muendo, ne prends pas ta chair pour du bois des planches d'une porte qu'on ferme sur des maisons sans seuil... La mort venait, mais têtu comme tous les fils de sa race, tout le poids du corps sur l'alarme pèse d'un lourd passif, il s'en fout, hilare au point de ternir à trop bon compte la nacre de sa denture d'éphèbe herbivore, herbicide, galilacéide qui surprend dans sa mire un charognard miteux, qui pouffe du rire de Solola, rebaptisée Marie, là qui le traite, lui, Elenga, de 'So-ouassi!'. La camarade de jeu d'hier qui joue la guindée gonflée par une mauvaise bouffée d'air qui a stagné dans une anse du Djoué et s'est répandue sur Bas-Congo quand la pauvre Solola est passée par là! De l'alarme, il sort autant de vapeur que de clameur et ça sinue dans sa chair comme un glas. Le voilà à contre-feu, ou en sandwich entre la joie et ce glas: voulant l'une et se retrouvant victime de l'autre. Quelle étrange situation: comment Luambu voit-il les m duses et que comprend-il dans ses fables que débite sans aucun sens de la mesure cet homme, ce fou pas si fou, tu sais, c'est vraiment de toi qu'il parle, oui, oui, c'est de moi maintenant, ne t'efface pas derrière ton silence! (179-80)

An analysis of the text as poetic discourse could well begin by focussing on the images, which follow each other in rapid succession, obeying as has already

been shown, a poetic logic. Life, sordid and treacherous, is portrayed in the sexual imagery of the prostitute. Luambu's ill-defined sense of guilt and his "mal de vivre" are expressed in the image of *la mer en gésine*, a recurrent image in U Tam'Si's poetry, and the jelly fish. The images become progressively hallucinatory: "Mazola qui veut mordre aux jujubes de l'arbre qu'il a à chaque flanc" and "la nacre de sa denture d'éphèbe herbivore, herbidice, galilacéide qui surprend dans sa mire un charognard miteux, qui pouffe du rire de Solola ..." The imperatives of rhythm and assonance at times predominate over semantic value and the long, tortured sentences, with poetic licence, defy the rules of grammar. In passages such as this, the literary quality of "lippe" or "gourgandines", contrasts with the everyday, conversational register which predominates in the more dramatic or narrative sequences. Yet all is not lyrical beauty; the earthy humour of "un pet d'ange", juxtaposed with "le paradis", is typical of U Tam'Si's ironical voice.

In this world of the imaginary mind, the logic of time and space is subverted and reality becomes confused. The ambiguity is established from the first "il". Is it Elenga who, with his carefree laugh, did not see death approaching? Or is it Luambu? Or is it Muendo, the "planche qui se laisse scier"? Who is it who cries out a warning to Muendo? The same "il"? The confusion is not gratuitous; it serves to

emphasise how the lives of the three friends are inextricably interwoven. Chronological time is irrelevant to the forces of destiny and so there is an easy flow between events past, present and future. Similarly, the focus of the narrative moves imperceptibly from the mental universe of Luambu to an external point, from which Luambu's thoughts are recounted in the third person: "comment Luambu voit-il les méduses et que comprend-il dans ses fables ..." The rhetorical question is never finished, for the focus again slips back into the mind of Luambu, who remembers Elenga's words about the mad preacher: "... ce fou pas si fou, tu sais, c'est vraiment de toi qu'il parle ..."

Repetition is an important element of this poetic discourse: not only does the musical effect of the assonance and alliteration bring out the lyrical quality of the prose but also as a structural element, repetition plays much the same role as in free verse. It marks the shape and controls the progression of the "poem". For example, the word "alarm", is an important signifier. It has the concrete connotations of the train's whistle and the siren at the saw mill, as well as the more metaphorical sense of a warning, associated as it is with the "glas". The word appears four times and each time the fatal warning is ignored; first by Elenga, then by Luambu, next by Muendo and finally with reference to Solola, a childhood

sweetheart of Luambu whom he recently met again quite by chance and who had the effect of reviving vivid memories of his past.

To what degree can the poetical nature of U Tam'Si's prose be attributed to his natural mode of expression, as a poet, and what is the extent of his debt to the oral tradition? Any attempt to answer these questions can only be speculative. However, that it is not erroneous to assume some link with the traditional art of story telling is supported by the following remarks made by Théophile Obenga in his introduction to Littérature traditionnelle des Mbochi.

> Cette littérature est tantôt parlée, tantôt récitée, mais elle est essentiellement chantée et dansée: le chant et la danse font un en Afrique noire. Ainsi le poète et le chanteur se confondent, indistincts, mêlés: le produit donne l'aède, c'est-à dire le poète grec de l'époque primitive, qui chantait ou récitait en s'accompagnant sur la lyre, tel Homère dont l'*Iliade* et l'*Odyssée* relèvent avant tout de la littérature orale, d'une longue tradition littéraire non écrite.
>
> Dans la langue mbochi, le mot *ndzemb* signifie exactement 'aède', 'poète-chanteur', et non 'chanteur' qui se dit : *oyembi*, du verbe 'exécuter un chant, une chanson'. *Nzembe* est un mot beaucoup plus fort que *oyembi*: il y a la dimension de création poétique avec le *ndzembe*, qui chante (*iyembe*) des poèmes-chants (*ondzembe* pl.*ndzembe*) avec art (*ndzole*) mais surtout crée (*ibongo*) des poèmes-chants.[7]

This is reminiscent of Léopold Senghor, who observed that the imagery, the rhythmic structures and the supernatural dimension of the oral tale align it

more closely to poetry than to prose.[8] Okpewho too, in both Myth in Africa and The Epic in Africa, draws out the significance of this lyrical element in traditional African narrative. For example, he says:

> But prose placed in the rather complex musical and histrionic environment such as we can see of Mwindo and Ozidi is not simply prose. It is prose propelled by the force of music and the aesthetic results are bound to be different from those of an unaccompanied narration. (Epic in Africa 65-66)

Senghor has focussed with particular acuteness on rhythm as a key structural factor in the traditional African tale and his observations can be usefully related to modern African prose. The rhythm which Senghor speaks of is not the metrical rhythm which determines Western poetic form; it emerges from the complex play of "analogical images", of repetition, parallelisms and alliteration, which together determine the dramatic progression of the poetic discourse.[9] Senghor perceives this rhythmic expression in ontological terms:

> Seul le rythme provoque le court-circuit poétique et transmue le cuivre en or, la parole en Verbe. ("Comme les lamantins" 160)

It is the "monotonous", incantatory rhythm "qui fait accéder à la vérité des choses essentielles: les Forces du Cosmos." ("Comme les lamantins" 166)

Théophile Obenga expresses this in somewhat less mystical terms in his introduction to the Mbochi oral tradition.[10] He identifies rhythm as being a cognitive force, a specific manner of existing and of perceiving the world.

Rhythm then is significant not only for the lyrical or poetical quality which it lends to the narration. It characterises a particular mental process, an aspect of the oral tradition that will be looked at in more detail in the context of mnemonic devices.

III

Turning now to the theatrical or dramatic element in U Tam'Si's narrative, it is particularly useful to consider the traditional story-teller's performance. Performance it indeed was, for he would enact the tale, impersonating each character and often accompanying himself with a musical instrument. It was not only the *ndembe* or "poète-chanteur" who would present his tale as a dramatic performance; during the course of a *veillée*, whoever might be moved to "prendre la parole" would act out the story with the appropriate movements and gestures, identifying with each character in turn. In The Epic in Africa Okpewho argues authoritatively that traditional "literature" did not have a solely religious or didactic

significance; the story-teller was expected to entertain the listeners, amuse them and keep their attention.

Okpewho notes a significant aspect of the narrator's performance; he would immerse himself in the story in such a way that he empathised with each character in turn. Very often, as he enacted the various parts, moving easily from one character to another, a happy confusion of pronouns reflected how completely he identified with them. In this way his dramatic technique is reflected in the linguistic structures of the narrative.

This phenomenon helps to illuminate an aspect of U Tam'Si's narrative which may well be disconcerting for the Western reader. The opening chapters of Les phalènes are particularly confusing for anyone not already familiar with the technique. The novel opens with a somewhat enigmatic "prologue", in which an extract from one of Propser's political speeches is evidently intended to fill in for the reader who has not read Les cancrelats and Les méduses. The first three pages of Chapter One start from the viewpoint of an external, third-person narrator, presenting a swirl of impressionistic details which conjure up the atmosphere of Brazzaville and Poto-Poto in the fifties. However, as the scene focusses on the Pobard family, the reader is thrown into a fictional world of constantly changing perspectives, so that it is

difficult to distinguish between the inner thoughts or words of the different characters, and the observations of the narrator.

> Léa pense que sa mère a deviné l'inévitable protestation de Ta Sophie. Elle sait aussi bien que moi que Ta Sophie, quand elle proteste, ne proteste pas pour de vrai.... On fête le départ de Jean Taty. Elle pense à ce départ de Jean Taty.... C'est son affaire à lui ou c'est l'affaire de tout le monde? Veut-il qu'on l'admire? Veut-il qu'on l'imite? Cette manie - elle n'en guérira donc jamais - de ruminer tout ce qui lui rentre par les oreilles - qui lui noue les sens - elle n'en guérira donc jamais... Elle rumine donc: Et s'il prend à son frère l'idée d'aller au Sénégal ou en France?... Il a déjà promis au député d'envoyer Léa et Paulin là-bas. Paulin ne rêve plus que de ça.... J'espère que le père ne cédera pas. Elle rumine mais ne laisse rien paraître. (18-19 emphasis added)

By omitting punctuation and textual markers, which would distinguish clearly for the reader the different speakers, U Tam'Si is not seeking to eliminate the narrator's presence, to create the impression of an anonymous author, as conceived of by Flaubert or the *Nouveaux Romanciers*. Indeed, as will be seen later, the narrator's presence and his relation to the reader is a powerful force in U Tam'Si's fiction. It is more illuminating to view the unbroken flow of the dialogue in terms of the oral narrator's art. In an oral performance, the ability of the narrator to transmute him or herself, to act out each character, makes it immediately clear as to

which character is speaking, without having to slow down the narration with superfluous linguistic markers. U Tam'Si would seem to have transposed this technique to the written text, in this way achieving the immediacy of the oral tale.

As the narration unfolds, it is only the pronouns that give any indication as to who is speaking and the perspective changes from that of the external narrator, to that of Léa and Sophie and back to the narrator. In the first two sentences, there is a smooth transition from the third to the first person: "Léa pense...", "..aussi bien que moi..." In an easy movement, by a process of "osmosis", the narrator has entered into the mind of Léa. Her thoughts are conveyed directly without the intervention of narrative markers.

Even more disconcerting to the uninitiated reader, is the unannounced change of referent with respect to the third person pronouns. Thus the first "elle" of the paragraph refers undoubtedly to Léa, who is thinking of Ta Sophie's probable protestations, should she take too many of the coals from the fire to heat the iron for her dress. There is nothing to indicate that the "elle" of, "Elle pense à ce départ..." is anyone other than Léa. Yet the thoughts that follow are strangely uncharacteristic of Léa. One's suspicions are soon confirmed. "Cette manie ... de ruminer," can refer only to Sophie. And indeed,

"son frère" refers to Prosper, Sophie's brother. The perspective has now changed to that of Sophie, at times recounted by an external observer (Léa? the narrator?) and then suddenly her direct thoughts: "J'espère que le père ne cédera pas." It is not always possible to distinguish between the different narrative angles. Presumably the rhetorical questions, such as "Veut-il qu'on l'admire?", are those that Sophie asks herself in her own mind. But what of, "Cette manie ... de ruminer...elle n'en guérira donc jamais... " Is this Sophie taking a critical look at herself or is this the narrator remarking upon her mania for rumination?

The question is in fact purely academic for, be it the narrator or Sophie who observes her mania for rumination, what is important is the fact that Sophie and the other protagonists reveal themselves, or are revealed, from within. It is this inner perspective that creates the dynamic immediacy of the narration.

It is of interest to note that U Tam'Si's prose writing reflects many of the criteria advocated by the writers of the *Nouveau Roman* and in particular, the literary theory of Nathalie Sarraute, as propounded in her collection of critical essays, L'ère du soupçon.[11] The parallel is not drawn with the intention of suggesting a possible influence upon U Tam'Si (who confessed to not having read the "new novelists" and whose narrative was in any event, written prior to

the publication of the main body of "new novels".) However, the similarities in narrative technique add an interesting perspective to U Tam'Si's writing.

Nathalie Sarraute explores literary techniques which enable her to trace what she calls "tropismes". These are the secret, inner movements of the protagonist's mind, made up of instinctive, unformulated sensations and reactions. In order to put the reader in direct contact with the unspoken world of "sub-conversations", Sarratue reproduces "le dialogue de théâtre". She eliminates the "he said", "she replied" - those constant directives on the part of the narrator, which slow down the action.

Like U Tam'Si, Sarraute or Claude Simon or Robbe-Grillet make considerable demands on the reader. The protagonist's inner thoughts and feelings are revealed in barely perceptible movements, perhaps a single word or a small gesture, and it is incumbent upon the reader to penetrate the surface conversation and appearances in order to explore the complexities and contradictions that lie beneath. U Tam'Si does not view human relations as a cruel battleground of tentative reaching out for contact and sharp repulsion, as does Sarraute.[12] However, he shares with her the technique of creating an atmosphere of dramatic suspense. Significantly Sarraute's writing too is "oral", in that she places great emphasis on the auditory value of her prose.

Dialogue then, and more importantly the unspoken dialogue or the protagonists' secret thoughts and imaginings, are revealed with all the dramatic immediacy of theatre. Conversations and sub-conversations, to use Nathalie Sarraute's terminology, make up a high proportion of U Tam'Si's narration. His is a performed tale, consisting of a rapid succession of scenes and tableaux that flow into each other with the minimum number of transitional markers or narrative links. In fact, the rare passages of straight narration weigh heavily, interrupting the flowing movement of the text.

One such passage, which is particularly static and stands out from the rest of the narration, is to be found in Les cancrelats, at the opening of the third section. The scene is Loango, ten years later, and the four pages that follow give a straight resumé of the intervening years. This factual summary of events is so uncharacteristic of U Tam'Si's writing that it can only be concluded that, in acceding to the editor's request for the novel to be shortened, a section of the original text was cut and replaced by a brief synopsis. From a stylistic point of view, this passage is awkward but by way of contrast, it serves to highlight the dynamic quality that otherwise characterises U Tam'Si's prose.

Often the reader identifies the specific mental universe into which he has been drawn only by the

style of speech or the mannerisms or the preoccupations typical of a particular protagonist. A passage taken from Les phalènes will illustrate how subtle stylistic changes mark the transition from the inner world of one protagonist to that of another. It is important however, to see the passage in the context of the scene as a whole, in order to appreciate how the characteristic discourse of the various protagonists is established.

It is the evening of the party given for Jean Taty and the Frenchman, Paul Vincent, has just announced the news that the legislation governing *l'indigénat* is to be dismantled. The scene is viewed principally through the eyes of Paulin who, as a young adolescent, observes the actions and reactions of the adults. Intelligent and perceptive, he shares his father's ironic perspective of people's behaviour but the idiom is unmistakably that of Paulin. For example, listening to the adult guests burping after the meal, Paulin reflects:

> C'est malpropre. Léa et moi on fait des concours de rots, pas à table, quand on sort de table!; moi, elle ne me bat pas à ce jeu-là! (40)

His schoolboy turn of phrase and preoccupations make a refreshing contrast with the more careful, self-conscious dialogue of the adults: "Oui, camarade

Prosper, le régime de l'indigénat est mort! La loi l'a envoyé à la guillotine".

In the following lines therefore, Paulin's particular style of expression can be distinguished:

> Quand tante se donne la peine de regarder par deux fois, on est transparent et même nu. Mais voilà, ça lui plaît de jouer les absentes, les inattentives. Ça lui épargne de donner tout le temps la leçon. La morale. Elle sait: quand elle persifle, ça fait mal! C'est-à-dire qu'on le prend mal. La vie n'est pas un malheur, c'est le mauvais savoir qui est un malheur. Les gens sont bêtes: regardez-les! Ce n'est pas elle ça, de dire que les gens sont bêtes.... Soudain elle pense à Funzi... (43-4)

The colloquialisms are those of Paulin, until the words, "La vie n'est pas un malheur, c'est le mauvais savoir qui est un malheur." It is not Paulin's way to speak in aphorisms, to give this philosophical, meditative angle to his thoughts. Nor does the young Paulin make such emphatically stringent comments as, "Les gens sont bêtes." The reader, whose ear is attuned to the subtle change of register, will have his intuitions confirmed by the change of subject pronoun; "Soudain elle pense à Funzi... " Yes, we have indeed moved into the inner world of Sophie's ruminations.

U Tam'Si, like any skilled oral story-teller, is masterful in representing the distinctive idioms and speech patterns of the host of characters who people his fictional universe. A specific style of speaking,

or recognisable obsessions, are developed over an extended span, by means of impressionistic glimpses or snatches of conversation and thought, so that progressively the reader identifies the different protagonists.

The idiom of the ordinary people is captured; the earthy humour, the superstitious rumour mongering, the "on-dit", the colloquialisms and ellipses. In Les méduses, lively crowd scenes interlace the narration, providing a commentary on events from the perspective of "le petit peuple".

One such interlude, entitled "Rumeurs. Hasard", opens with the phrases, "Le hasard, le hasard! Le hasard n'explique rien du tout". What seems to be an observation made by the narrator himself, by a subtle process of mutation becomes part of an animated discussion between an unspecified number of people, among them André Sola, recognisable by his obsessive desire to explain the mystery of the deaths of two friends and the coma into which the third has fallen. On closer examination, a pattern can be seen in the apparently incoherent welter of interjections, questions and sardonic comments. André Sola is trying to explain his idea that there is more to these events than mere chance but his pontifical circumlocutions irritate some of his listeners, who intervene. Others defend him, trying to give him the chance to speak.

The argument becomes increasingly heated, a former soldier leaves in high dudgeon, insults fly:

> Rien que d'y penser: ça me donne de l'urticaire... Tu ne serais pas né avec? Va foutre ta mère! Voilà: plus moyen de discuter tranquillement... (89-91)

Finally, humour takes over and with much good-natured bantering, most of the group departs, leaving André and one other to discuss in peace their views on events. Only once, in the last paragraph, is mention made of Sola's name. Yet his identity in the group is unmistakable. Furthermore, the comments and repartee of various participants are relayed *en direct* and there are no third-person narrator interventions, nor even the conventions of inverted commas, to punctuate and slow down the pace. The reader participates in the scene as a first-person observer, appreciating to the full the dramatic tension and humour.

The protagonists' inner thoughts are projected with equally dramatic vigour. Scenes remembered or imagined, passing impressions or ideas, follow each other in rapid succession, linked by a non-logical thread of association. The immediacy of this non-verbal form of communication spares little concern for stylistic niceties; Sophie expresses this graphically as she relives in her mind the painful scene of Prosper's arrest:

> Les mots lui sortaient de la bouche comme les cadavres de son récit, soit les pieds devant, soit en morceaux, sans ordre. Des soupirs, des mots, des exclamations. Des proverbes qui embrouillaient ce qu'elle disait. Elle oubliait de fermer une parenthèse, ou remontait son récit pour en ouvrir une. Voir la mort et s'apercevoir qu'elle vous épargne allonge l'agonie. (Cancrelats 133)

As in theatre, the protagonists in U Tam'Si's narrative reveal themselves not only through their words and but also through their actions. Like the oral tale, it is both an auditory and a visual account. There are scenes of violent physical action, enacted with all the intensity of a live performance. The following passage from Les cancrelats, illustrates one such episode:

> Le vin aida Prosper à dire cette chose qu'il aurait jugée lui-même stupide. C'était trop pour Mahata. Elle le prit au collet avec une telle force que Prosper se trouva paralysé par l'effet de surprise. Des buveurs se levèrent comme si Mahata les avait tous extraits de leur siège d'une même main par le collet. Elle entraîna sa victime dehors. Elle revint dans la salle où les buveurs s'étaitent rassis et commentaient la scène. Elle se saisit du 'kilo' de nabao de Prosper que le tenancier de la boutique allait récupérer, et se mit à le répandre en trépignant de rage. Elle fit table rase d'un revers de main devant un groupe éburlué. 'Lâches, lâches, vous êtes tous des lâches, tous comme lui. Un kilo! un kilo! et vous faites à vos femmes des avortons. Vous les laissez mourir à petit feu. Des hommes qui ne peuvent donner à entendre raison à un des leurs, à un autre homme, méritent qu'on crache sur eux.' Et Mahata s'époumona à cracher ici et là. Des

> bras vigoureux la maîtrisèrent. Elle fut purement et simplement jetée à la rue. (254)

Usually, however, the gestures are more subtle, sometimes barely percetible movements that reveal inner thoughts or reactions:

> - Vous m'en demandez trop, signifiait ce regard lent, indifférent, qu'elle posait n'importe où sur n'importe qui.
> -Sahsuké'mâ lui criait sa belle-soeur dans un regard plein de compassion. Juliette détournait les yeux. (285)

Gestures are noted but their significance is not spelled out. The reader is invited to hear and see and to make his or her own interpretation.

IV

At the beginning of Chapter Five, it was said that the term "novel" is misleading when applied to U Tam'Si's prose narratives and that his four published novels should be read as one continuous epic tale. To substantiate this view, it is necessary to look in some detail at what is understood by "epic" for, in the domain of African literature, it is a term that has given rise to vigorous debate over the past two decades.

Ruth Finnegan's assertion that "epic hardly seems to occur in sub-Saharan Africa... " has been strongly

contested by African writers and in particular, by Isidore Okpewho.[13] Okpewho is a formidable proponent of the African epic, for he is not only personally familiar with the African tradition but he is also a scholar in the field of the European epic genre. His comparatist approach and his knowledge of the research done by Milman Parry and Albert Lord, showing the Homer epic to be an essentially oral work, enables him to bring fresh insight into the discussion surrounding the African epic genre and to dispel the misconceptions of critics such as Finnegan.

Finnegan defines the epic as being one single narration, in verse form, of the historical events in the life of the hero. By failing to see the epic as a dynamic form, determined by the contextual imperatives of the narrator-audience relationship, she ignores an essential criterion. For the epic, far from merely reconstituting the historical past, enacts through the heroic protagonist the historical and spiritual identity of a people. Finnegan views the epic genre as a written form and this represents a most revealing example of how handicapped a Western critic may be when confronted with the African oral tradition. For one who is conditioned by a purely literate culture, it is extremely difficult to understand the determining factors of pre-literate expression. In the Western world, where little remains of traditional story-telling, literary

conventions such as a clear story line and a unified, pyramidal structure predominate. Hence, according to Finnegan, a tale that is "a very loosely related bundle of separate episodes, told on separate occasions and not necessarily thought of as one single work of art" cannot be considered an epic.

In this study of the contemporary African novel, it is not intended to enter into an exhaustive discussion of what constitutes the African epic form since at most, only certain elements of the epic can be perceived in U Tam'Si's narrative. It is not suggested that U Tam'Si was some kind of modern-day bard and that his four novels constitute a transcribed oral epic. The analysis of his work from the perspective of the oral narrative tradition shows that his writing is situated somewhere midway on the line between total orality and total literacy. There are in particular two aspects of the epic form that can be fruitfully examined in relation to his narrative; the episodic structure, together with the various narrative devices used to control the lengthy tale, and the treatment of the hero or anti-hero.

The epic tale, as found in the African oral tradition, shares certain common features with the classical European genre. Isidore Okpewho defines the oral epic as:

> fundamentally a tale about the fantastic deeds of a man or men endowed with something more than human might and operating in something larger than the normal human context and it is of significance in portraying some stage of the cultural or political development of a people.[14]

This shares the essential elements of the classical epic form; the extraordinary exploits of the hero, which have a supernatural dimension and which are an expression of the collective values of a society.

With these elements in mind, to what extent can U Tam'Si's narrative be considered an epic tale? Clearly it cannot be said that Prosper or Gaston or any other of the main protoganists define themselves in terms of their heroic actions. They are certainly not portrayed as another Soundiata or M'pfoumou Ma Mazono. As has already been seen, U Tam'Si's characters are revealed not through heroic exploits but primarily through their inner, mental universe.

However, Prosper's quest for understanding and his search after excellence sets him apart from the crowd and distinguishes him as being endowed with something more than his peers. Furthermore, his vision of a free and united Congolese people expresses an ideal to which his society can aspire. In this respect, the message is similar to that exemplified in the tales of legendary heroes.

It is useful at this point to look briefly at U Tam'Si's treatment of the Chaka theme in his play Le

Zulu, since it offers a valuable insight into the way in which he modifies the traditional heroic figure and gives it contemporary significance.[15] Chaka is portrayed as a man with great vision and skill but plagued by his overwhelming ambition. U Tam'Si has based his play on Mofolo's version of the life of Chaka but with significant omissions and additions. The symbolic element is fundamental. For example, Issanoussi's promise of absolute power comes to Chaka in the form of a voice which materialises as a tall "totem anthropomorphe", resembling an army chief's baton. The voice speaks in sibylline phrases, such as, "Tu es le maître. Je suis le serviteur de ton dessein," or, "Le seuil de Nobamba est ouvert," or, "Surveille l'écume de la mer." It is the way in which Chaka himself interprets these symbols that determines events and the essential action is situated at the level of Chaka's inner, mental universe. Obsessed by his dreams of power, he chooses to ignore warnings, such as the drops of blood on the short-handled assegai which Ndlebé "finds" outside his hut. He takes his destiny into his own hands to the point of choosing his own death. For in U Tam'si's version, Chaka commits suicide. His last words are:

> Mort au champ de la défaite. (Silence). Quelle gloire. Triste!

Chaka realises that he has become neither master of "l'écume de la mer" nor servant of his destiny. He chooses the freedom of death rather than be enslaved by the approaching foreign invaders.

With all his very human weaknesses and mistakes, Chaka distinguishes himself from those around him, not only by his great courage and skill as a warrior but more importantly, by his intelligence and his clear-sightedness. From the very beginning, he recognises the threat that his ambition represents:

> Si seulement je pouvais concevoir du dépit pour mon ambition... C'est comme si je n'étais pas libre... Ce rêve me lie. (30)

Not for him is the comfortable security of ignorance:

> L'homme est aveugle puisqu'il ne voit pas où il va. Moi je vois - ce que vois est horrible. (130)

Unlike earlier French language versions of the Chaka story by, for example, Seydou Badian and Djibril Tamsir Niane, in Le Zulu the ideological message is played down.[16] Here Chaka grapples with the problems facing any leader of men, as he balances precariously between his vision of a unified and strong Zulu people and his own overriding thirst for power. He enacts the familiar U Tam'Si theme of the search for understanding and in so doing, portrays the ideals of courage and integrity.

Like U Tam'Si's Chaka, Prosper, Judge Poaty and Gaston are not portrayed as mythical or legendary heroes but they are exceptional beings. Their intelligence and their vision set them apart from others. They are solitary, even lonely people who, by refusing mediocrity, set themselves at risk. Through their personal suffering, these heroes illustrate the values of their community.

There is another dimension of the traditional epic hero which is of significance here; he is distinguished not only by the ideals which he pursues but also by the harmonious blend of the human and superhuman which he represents. He enjoys supernatural powers or is aided by supranatural services while at the same time maintaining his independence, for he is not the slave of divine forces. Events have a literal and also an allegorical meaning, and the story unfolds in the material as well as in the spiritual universe. Within the traditional Animistic world view, the African epic hero moves particularly easily between the world of the spirits and the world of human beings. Once again, this perspective is useful in order to understand the forces that motivate U Tam'Si's protagonists.

For example, Prosper knows that his identity is integrally related to that of his dead father and grandfather and he senses their spirits as a very real presence to which he looks for guidance and

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For example, Prosper knows that his identity is integrally related to that of his dead father and grandfather and he senses their spirits as a very real presence to which he looks for guidance and

understanding. He accepts unquestioningly Sophie's suprahuman powers and she provides for him a protective shield from the evil machinations that surround him. Names, too, are often of special or supranatural significance, as when Prosper believes quite naturally that his mother is resuscitated in his child, who has been given the same name.

But it is particularly in Ces fruits si doux that the protagonists take on a supranatural dimension. It has been seen how Judge Poaty, "magistrat et magicien", enjoys special powers which allow him to cross easily into the world of the spirits and so to see things beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. Similarly, Gaston's initiatory journey and his suffering contain a mystical dimension that reaches beyond the real, natural world.

There are then, two features of the traditional epic hero which are relevant to U Tam'Si's protagonists: they are guided by supranatural powers and, in their quest for understanding, they exemplify the values befitting an ordered society. This transforms U Tam'Si's narrative into something more than an account of contemporary historical events, confined to a particular place in time. In much the same way as the traditional epic poet adapted the story of legendary heroes in order to convey truths pertinent to his present context, so too U Tam'Si's

tale transcends the limits of the twentieth century Congo.

The episodic structure of U Tam'Si's four-part tale is another aspect which can be usefully examined in the light of the oral epic. When read in terms of accepted Western criteria, the narrative is disconcerting not only because of its length but also on account of its apparent lack of structure. Temporal and spatial dimensions are difficult to grasp, relations between the profusion of characters are unexplained, long digressions constantly interrupt the action, episodes follow one upon the other, "strung paratactically like beads on a string."[17] In short, the narrative defies all notion of unity, that aesthetic criterion based on logic which is so much part of a purely literate culture.

However, when placed in its true cultural and historical context, where orality and literacy co-exist contemporaneously, U Tam'Si's novels are better understood. The slow, "rambling" development does not mean that U Tam'Si was incapable of a tight story line. The choice of a non-organic, episodic structure is more appropriate to his poetic purpose than would be a unified plot based on a logical sequence of events. It is here that the structure of the traditional African epic offers some important insights. In fact, its episodic nature - the very

element with which Finnegan took issue - is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the oral epic.

In his detailed study of the processes that mark the development from a purely oral mode of expression to literacy, Walter Ong shows how the pyramidally structured narrative, with a beginning, a climax and a denouement, is possible only in literary composition.[18] The oral poet could not be expected to remember and string together in their correct chronological order, all the episodes in the life of Sundjata or Ulysses. In any event, his concern was not with plot but with the re-creation of significant episodes in the life of the hero. As has already been seen, the hero's exploits served to illustrate and to explore the values of the society and at the same time, the narrator sought to entertain and please his audience. His narration was situational rather than abstract. To use the words of Okpewho, he created "a narrative collage" of cameo-like scenes.

Applied to U Tam'Si's novels, this concept is illuminating. Prosper's story consists essentially of vividly drawn scenes or epidsodes, where the narrative link is tenuous, sometimes assured only by the presence of the protagonist himself. Furthermore, U Tam'Si appears to take great joy in the apparently gratuitous development of such scenes, seemingly allowing himself to be carried away by the pleasure of a memory, or the humour of a situation or, as has

already been seen, the flavour of the words themselves. In addition to the poetic value of such digressions, the following example illustrates another aspect of a technique which is characteristic of U Tam'Si's rich, exuberant style.

The first four chapters of Les phalènes, covering some thirty-five pages, descr'be the farewell dinner given by Prosper for Ta Jean Taty. They constitute a series of vivid vignettes which flash forward or backward in time, according to the narrational imperatives of the moment. This may be the need to emphasise a point, as in Sophie's profound ruminations. It may be for the purpose of evoking ironic amusement, as in the graphic description of the wives of Taty's two colleagues, seen through the eyes of Léa. Or perhaps it is the pure delight in words that prompts a the long and detailed description of the dinner itself:

> Et finalement on se met à table, les gosses à part des grandes personnes. Des nourritures de toutes sortes: du boeuf à la sauce tomate; de la viande de sanglier frite avec des oignons,; fumet à la sauce blanche de graines de citrouille grillées et pilées; du poisson de fleuve fumé cuit avec du dongo-dongo, gluant à point; des carpes grillées à la braise; du poisson salé à l'huile de palme; des mabokés de silure; du saka-saka; du poulet à la moambe; du fou-fou; de la banane plantin pilée et pas pilée; du manioc grillé; de la tchikouangua façon ngouli-yaka; des gari; ouf!... (38)

In U Tam'Si's discourse there is no sense of hurry, no build up to a climax, no eager anticipation of the end. Instead, each stage of the story is enjoyed for itself and pleasing elements are lingered over. This is reminiscent of the traditional story-teller who, in Okpewho's words, has a keen "sense of the moment". Feeling the interest that a particular audience may show in a specific detail or angle in his story, he will develop it to its maximum. His skill lies in his ability to return to the main narrative and pick up the thread of the story without breaking the tempo of his delivery. He does not lose sight of the fact that the audience expects to be entertained and a story-teller who is incapable of adapting his tale to suit the mood and interests of his audience is doomed to failure. This narrator-audience relationship and its significance for U Tam'Si's novels will be looked at in more detail further on in this chapter.

Another angle on the episodic structure of U Tam'Si's writing is offered by Tzvetan Todorov, in his discussion of the mediaeval allegory or epic.[19] He distinguishes between the structure of the modern novel, based on what he calls "l'intrigue de causalité," and that of the traditional tale or epic, based on "l'intrigue de prédestination." In the traditional epic, the events of the story are well-known to the audience and the recounting of them will

contain no surprises. This affects not only the narrative style but also the notion of plot and hence the structure of the narrative. In the absence of a unifying, pyramidal plot, coherence must be found at another level. Moreover, the narrator cannot depend on the element of suspense to maintain the attention of his listeners.

The various, sometimes apparently unconnected episodes in the life of the legendary hero are linked at the level of ideas rather than at that of the action. The hero, who is the one constant in the tale, exemplifies through both his failures and his successes, certain ideals or moral values. Just as in an old tapestry, it is these threads that constitute the basic fabric of the epic, with the hero's adventures representing the vivid design painted on it. The relative positions of the figures or the sequence of the tableaux are not an essential factor of the overall power and beauty of the work. Similarly, in the oral epic, the essence of the tale is not dependent upon the chronological order of the hero's adventures. In fact, it is not difficult to pick up inconsistencies and contradictions in time and place or even name.

Interestingly, the same sort of "lapses" can be found in U Tam'Si's narrative, even though the written tale allows for careful checking of detail. For example, in Ces fruits si doux Judge Poaty was

kidnapped the evening of Gaston's return from France with his new wife Mathilde. Yet later in the narrative, many years after his disappearance, Mathilde recalls how very fond of her he was and she remembers enjoying sparring with him in conversation. Such inconsistencies are not evidence of U Tam'Si inability to maintain lucid control of the facts of his story.

In this instance, there are other, more compelling narrative requirements. Judge Poaty's abduction the evening of the party is most suitably timed, since the crowds and the excitement meant that his absence was only really missed the next day. Yet Mathilde's remembered conversations with him answer another purpose. Raymond Poaty, very much the family patriarch who insisted on maintaining traditional family customs, nevertheless understood that society must change, that the past must not be allowed to stultify the present. He represents in a sense, the ideal synthesis of the traditional and the modern and in order for this particular quality to be portrayed, it needs to be contrasted with the determined modernism of Mathilde.

The episodic structure, with the sometimes bewildering flashes backwards and forwards, is an aspect of the narrator's specific treatment of time, which has already been discussed in terms of its thematic importance. When story-telling is seen in

the context of a holistic notion of time, where there is no physical or spiritual separation between past and present, in the tale itself there is a correspondingly easy movement between events past and present. For the Western reader, who has a more rigid temporal sense, this is not always easy to comprehend.

In demonstrating how a shift in focus can elucidate U Tam'Si's writing, it is again helpful to turn to Tzvetan Todorov's discussion of the epic form. With respect to the Grail epic, he identifies two kinds of narration, a distinction that cuts across the conventional Western genre categories. He distinguishes between a narration that follows a horizontal line and a narration that consists of a series of variations which build up on a vertical axis. In the latter, each substitution contributes further to the reader-listener's understanding of the narrative's essential "message". This distinction is particularly illuminating when applied to U Tam'Si's four-part tale, for it puts into a new perspective the disconcerting breaks in the narration. As it has been seen, Prosper's story begins in Les cancrelats, is interrupted by Les méduses where the main protagonist is Luambu, and is then taken up again in Les phalènes. The final novel Ces fruits si doux, introduces a new set of central figures. Les méduses and Ces fruits si doux are linked with the Prosper saga by passing references to secondary characters, such as Taty

Loutard and Paulin, or the brief appearance of Luambu as the truck driver. Les méduses represents even a spatial break, for whereas the other three novels are situated primarily in Poto-Poto-Brazzaville, Luambu's story takes place at Pointe-Noire.

If however, the concept of a vertical structure is applied to this narrative, its thematic coherence becomes quite apparent, for Prosper, Luambu, Judge Poaty and Gaston all undertake the same quest for understanding. Interestingly, Todorov notes that the vertical structure is most frequently found in poetry, which relies heavily on symmetry and repetition, whereas fiction is usually constructed according to causal relations, based on a logical and temporal ordering of events. Todorov's observations regarding the vertical, poetic structure in the mediaeval epic serve to confirm that the poetic element of U Tam'Si's prose links it directly to the oral traditon.

It is perhaps even more helpful to modify Todorov's concept of a vertical structure to that of a prism. A ray of light shining through a prism is reflected at varied angles, according to the different planes through which it passes. So too, in U Tam'Si's narrative, the central theme, which is the quest for understanding self and the individual's role in society, is viewed from a wide range of angles and perspectives. These are determined by each

protagonist's specific personality and historical circumstances.

There is yet further evidence of the traditional epic tale in U Tam'Si's narrative. This concerns the use of mnemonic devices, those "aide-mémoire" techniques which the oral narrator uses to help him handle his lengthy tale. It is worth noting that in the context of orality, length is in itself a criterion of quality. It is a sign of success if the narrator is able to maintain the attention of his audience for a long span of time for, to do so, his story must be well performed. The same may be said of U Tam'Si's narrative, which extends over a thousand pages and which engages the reader by the sheer vigour of the prose.

Rhythm, antithesis, parallelisms, alliteration and assonance all play their part in creating mnemonic patterns, or in Walter Ong's words, "memorable thoughts". While such elements of style are more easily identified in poetry - and this suggests a rich field of research with respect to U Tam'Si's poetical expression - in his prose there are stylistic elements which relate very closely to the oral narrator's technique.

One of these is the frequent use of what can be called "person qualifiers". For example, in Ces fruits si doux, Judge Poaty's wife is frequently

referred to as "Mathilde sa femme", even though from the context there can be no confusion of identity. Similarly, Judge Poaty is invariably referred to by his full name "le juge Raymond Poaty" or even "le bon juge Raymond Poaty". Prosper's friend is repeatedly identified as "le camarade Paul Vincent". Full family names are used, as if to keep in mind their lineage; Sophie Tchissimbu, Marc Mavoungu, Aimée Volange, André Sola, Lufwa Lumbu. Judged by literary as opposed to oral criteria, this repeated signalling of identity and relationships is considered redundant and cumbersome. In a written text, such reminders are not necessary for, in the event of losing the thread of the story, the reader is able to refer back in the text. In an oral delivery however, the narrator needs to help the listeners to keep track of characters and events, particularly in a long epic tale.

This stylistic trait is not a constant in U Tam'Si's prose and yet it appears often enough to warrant comment, particularly when considered in relation to his use of another mnemonic device, the name-epithet. In the oral narrative, one or several epithets may be regularly attached to a name to indicate a protagonist's character or role in the action.

In the novels, one of the best examples of this is the play on the name of Pambault, who is repeatedly referred to as "Monsieur Dieudonné Jean-Marie-François

Pambault le Débonnaire". The connotations of this name-epithet are complex and subtle. Pambault's vanity is his fatal weakness, for his desperate desire to impress the beautiful "perle de Kin" and his subsequent disappointment, unbalance his fragile equilibrium and lead him to betray Prosper. At the same time, the name contains ironical overtones that point to the affected replacement of the African name "Mpambou" by "Pambault" and the adoption of a string of first names, thus mimicking *ad absurdum* the French custom.

In Les méduses there is to be found another striking example of name-epithets, this time those given to the spirits that abound at night: "ceux-à-une-tête, ceux-qui-marchent-sur-le-cul, ceux-encore-qui-le-jour-traînent-la-nuit-au-fond-de-leurs-yeux". (184) These graphic, humorous, even gently ironic sobriquets are directly translated from Vili and they illustrate particularly well how in U Tam'Si's prose, the traditional is blended with the modern.

The name-epithets contribute also to the rhythmical structure of the text. On the one hand, they add to the musical quality of the prose where, as has already been noted, the evocative power of words is fully exploited. More importantly, the name-epithets create rhythmic patterns which are essential for the oral narrator who, in the absence of any

visual markers, must rely on his ear to aid his memory.

As Parry, Lord and their successors found from their research into formulaic patterns, the formula is determined by metrical rhythm. In different oral performances, the formulas are never strung together in quite the same way twice and here the musical accompaniment is of vital importance, as it both stabilises and modifies the oral "text".

It is not suggested that U Tam'Si's narrative discourse is composed of formulaic patterns as in the traditional oral epic tale. However, the frequent repetition of word clusters, particularly in Les cancrelats and Les méduses, warrents some explanation, particularly since an unaccustomed reader may well consider such repetition to be redundant and stylistically awkward. The following are examples of this:

> ne me demande pas qui se joue ainsi de nous... (Cancrelats 161)
>
> Qui se joue ainsi de l'homme? (Cancrelats 172)
>
> l'air du pays (Cancrelats 9, 21, 34, 42 etc)
>
> l'air du temps (Cancrelats, title, section 1)
>
> la pluie d'Elenga (Méduses 210, 212)

Of even greater significance are the ideo-images, whose structuralising role has already been discussed at length in Chapter Five.

These recurrent elements are not consistent enough to constitute a narrative device as fundamentally important as the formula in an oral composition. Yet they represent a particular cognitive process, a way of expression natural to anyone with intimate knowledge of the art of oral tale-telling.

It has been seen that the concept of formulaic patterns introduces a new perspective to the notion of originality in artistic composition. In an oral performance, the skilful use of a group of words, employed in different contexts but under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea, is too complex a device to be dismissed as cliché or redundant. The oral performer shows his artistry in the way he strings together the various elements of his tale, adapting it at each performance to the contextual imperatives of time, place and audience. It is here that the work of Parry and Lord has shed new light on the apparent stylistic "lapses" in the Homeric epics.

Similarly, it would be mistaken to suppose that a poet of the verbal artistry of U Tam'Si would resort to repeated images or expressions for want of something new. They are intrinsic to the text, creating a subtle pattern of echoes and resonances, of forward and backward references not only of sound but

also of ideas, which contribute to the rich and lyrical quality of his prose.

A final comment on the subject of mnemonic devices concerns again the heroic figure.. Walter Ong points out that in an oral tale, heroic figures are necessary because colourless figures are forgotten. By contrast, in the literate tradition, the novel is able to depict ordinary, life-size characters or, as in the case of contemporary prose, the anti-herb and even an absent hero. Influenced by such trends in Western writing during the course of the past four decades, critics have tended to be dismissive of those novels whose protagonists are real, flesh and blood characters. This, it is felt, smacks of nineteenth century realism.

In terms of such criteria, U Tam'Si's novels may well be considered to be out of line, for his characters are very real people, set in concrete, real-life situations. If however, they are viewed from the perspective of oral narrative techniques, the structural importance of such figures as Prosper, Sophie or Gaston will be better appreciated.

The interplay of traditional techniques and the writer's own original stylistic elements can be said to reflect an underlying principle governing oral composition. In recounting well-known tales, the oral narrator was both inheritor of tradition and donor,

both interpreter of the past and creator. Within certain fixed parameters, the skilled performer would modify his story according to the needs of the moment and in keeping with his own poetic and oratorical talent.

In much the same way, U Tam'Si represents a meeting point between tradition and modernity. Like the oral poet, he is able to adapt the traditional story-telling techniques, which he would have learned in his childhood years, to the different demands of the written medium and the expectations of a very different audience. This raises the complex question of the author-reader relationship, which is a factor of fundamental importance for an understanding of African writing in general and U Tam'Si's prose writing in particular.

V

In Chapter Two, various critical approaches to the author-reader relationship were discussed and among them the notion of the "anonymous author" which has prevailed in some contemporary Western writing. This concept is particularly interesting for, in a contrastive manner, it brings sharply into focus the fact that U Tam'Si, and indeed most other African writers, is not at all concerned with concealing his identity. Far from endeavouring to remain "absent"

from the text, the author-narrator is a strong and constant presence. U Tam'Si makes no apologies for the omniscient, guiding voice that controls the unfolding of his narrative. In this, the author-narrator resembles quite clearly the oral story teller; in the words of Mohamadou Kane, "Sa voix domine tout, crée tout."[20]

Traditionally, the oral narrator's controlling presence is tempered by the the active participation of the audience, who intervene, disagree or applaud. Applied to U Tam'Si's epic tale, this notion of the author's relationship with his reader, sensed as a live audience, is illuminating. The author-reader, or narrator-audience, rapport has bearing on three aspects of the narrative: the narrator-author's humourous and ironical eye, the didactic element and certain stylistic features emanating from the direct intervention of the narrator.

The humourous element is evident in U Tam'Si's narrative even in the most painful or sombre of episodes. U Tam'Si himself has made some insightful comments about humour, which are revealing of his preoccupations as a creative writer. For example, the importance of being able to laugh at adversity is a recurrent theme mentioned by him in interviews. In Mercer Cook's preface to Légendes africaines, U Tam'Si is quoted as saying:

> Je suis absolument convaincu que des civilisations qui auraient pu disparaître ont survécu grâce à l'humour, au refus opposé par le rire à l'angoisse meutrière. Le rire est d'ailleurs un thème qui circule chez moi d'un livre à l'autre. (12)

His is not the destructive, jaundiced sneer that comes from bitter disillusion. That sort of irony destroys the bond between people and undermines their sense of solidarity. Speaking with reference to one of his collections of poetry, Arc musical, U Tam'Si describes his particular ironic perception:

> Ce n'est pas le rire de la dérision mais de la santé, de la confiance dans la vie ... il ne s'agit pas de l'humour noir ... mais d'un humour qui permet à l'opprimé de se défendre, de défier et de désarmer le bourreau.[21]

In the same interview he said:

> ...et je suis un rieur qui ne peut résister à l'envie de pouffer de rire à chaque leçon que l'on veut me donner.

This emphasis on laughter links up with the narrative techniques employed by the oral story teller, who makes extensive use of the whole range of humour, from witty comments to ironical observation and the burlesque. For he is above all an entertainer; he knows that, to please his audience and

to keep their attention, he must amuse them and make them laugh.

In U Tam'Si's story, there are many instances of earthy, spicy humour, or graphic images relished for the enjoyment of the laughter they provoke. The narrator invites us to chuckle with him at Prosper's astonishment, when he discovers that Sophie has gone to Lonzolc:

> Prosper ouvre une grande bouche, bonne à gober toutes les mouches, toutes les abeilles, toutes les sauterelles... (Phalènes 128)

We are introduced to Muendo by means of a witty play on words which, if it were not so amusing, would indeed be "grossier":

> Muendo, c'est les femmes, les femmes, les femmes! Il les lui faut toutes! Toutes tombent! Qu'est-ce qu'elles lui trouvent? Qu'est-ce qu'il a? Il y a qu'il est con, donc drôle. Si je voulais être grossier comme certains - je ne vise personne - je dirais qu'il leur fout le feu où je pense, d'ailleurs, avec toute la sciure qu'il peut promettre, c'est une économie rêvée pour elles, moins de fatigue; d'ailleurs, si tu vas quelque part et qu'une femme te dise qu'elle fait la cuisine avec de la sciure, tu peux être sûr que la dame s'est déjà ouverte à notre bonhomme. Le bois est cher mais avec de la poussière de bois, notre homme a de quoi se chauffer le bas du ventre et le ventre avec, de plus. (Méduses 65)

In Les méduses, the three friends tease each other constantly, or burst into fits of unexplained

hilarity. Oppressed as they are by the heavy atmosphere of foreboding, their laughter is like a cure. It is health giving and it reinforces the bond between them:

> Pour la deuxième fois de la journée, Luambu éclatait de rire, presque sans raison. D'un rire communicatif. Elenga réagit comme Mazola. La même rechute dans une saison d'enfance! Un adulte, forcément, apprend à fermer le visage, autrement il est vite suspecté de vaine prodigalité ou d'une abusive pusillanimité. Un adulte avec un visage d'enfant est idiot ou stupide.
>
> Ils riaient en se montrant du doigt, soit que la manière de rire de l'un ou de l'autre est d'un grotesque désopilant, soit que le masque que le rire donne au visage de l'un et l'autre révèle une transparence d'âme si belle que c'est surprenant qu'ils l'aient tenue si longtemps caché! (142)

Sometimes, they laugh in order to hide their tears, to unwind, to release tension. In the case of the three friends, their almost hysterical mirth has a tragic dimension. Whereas they laugh to ward off a sense of foreboding, for the reader who already knows what lies in store for them, their vibrant laughter focusses on the dramatic irony of their approaching death.

More often than not, however, the humourous touches are of critical intent. They mark the distance that the narrator creates between himself and the characters, the ironic eye with which he regards their weaknesses and foibles. The traditional story-

teller would frequently make pointed social comment but his subtle, mocking allusions to contemporary people and events would be appreciated only by an astute listener. If he were daring to criticise a powerful personnage, he might make his point by means of exaggerated praise, or a flash of wit, or a barbed comment immediately followed by further praise. Often his ironic viewpoint would be expressed not so much in words as by what was left unsaid.

In U Tam'Si's narrative, the author-narrator's critical presence is often felt. In particular, superstition and confused beliefs, be they Christian or traditional, are a constant target. In Les cancrelats, the narrator makes fun of the young Prosper's muddled interpretation of the mission fathers' teaching. Reference has already been made to the scene where Prosper is sitting on the beach with his cousin Taty. Prosper endeavours to explain why they are of a damned race: "Nous ne voyons pas notre queue! On en a bien une comme le diable. On est des diables." (58) he assures the bewildered Taty. Poor Taty furtively feels his behind for that incriminating evidence. Prosper, secure in the knowledge that his remaining little bit of tail will disappear when he takes his first communion, solemnly lifts his face to the heavens, suffering "avec le sens aigu du martyr, l'éclat désagréable du soleil brûlant."

In Les méduses, the narrator's ironical humour is directed at the *voyant*, whose tongue must be loosened by a few bottles of "the white man's alcohol." He speaks in unintelligible enigmas and his ability to see beyond the here and now fades at the crucial moment. One cannot but laugh too at André Sola's anguished confusion: should he belive that his "cure" from stuttering was indeed brought about by the copy of the Credo made for him by Luambu, written out in gothic letters in red, green, blue-violet and black ink, outlined in gold? Or was it the work of the devil? And in any event, he only stopped stuttering for a week! Just to be sure, André has the Credo blessed by the priest.

The French administrators comes in for their fair share of mocking humour. Sometimes it is a passing sweep: "C'était Mherlan, l'intendant de l'école supérieure. Un homme de moyenne carrure, à la démarche fanfaronne. Un Blanc, en somme." (Cancrelats 229) At other times, a comic portrait has ironic undertones, such as that of Jacquart, whom Aimée Volange plays along in order to find out what she can from him as to how the French Administration views Prosper's political activities. Both Aimée and Jacquart fare badly under the merciless eye of the narrator, who highlights their mutual deception and self delusions.

Those who emulate White people are held up to derision: the opening chapters of Les phalènes sets the tone, in portraying how the charleston dress, which is all the rage, dominates the thoughts and conversation of the ladies of Poto-Poto. European fashions are adopted, as are European names; European music and dances replace traditional sounds.

> Les disques His Master's voice, série G.V.1,2,3,... "Peanuts Vendor": nan-han "Marie (pour Mani!) Mariiii hi hi hi! Lala la la !" Ah la vie! Ces disques-là font autant de ravages que le tafia naguère, plus de blessures que la chicotte des lappots naguère! (14-15)

Seen through the eyes of the children, the adults' pretention is even more amusing. At the party given for Uncle Taty by Prosper, Paulin and Léa observe with the devastating directness of the young, the self-conscious, "twin" wives of Taty's friends:

> Marie-Claire, qui n'a pas la peau bien claire, a le front court, le cheveu près du crâne, une bouche comme ouverte au couteau, un peu en saillie sur les dents sortantes bien écartées. Elle est grosse de partout: là, là, là et là. Elle est l'épouse de Ndéléla, de deux têtes plus haut que sa femme, un peu fait comme elle - un peu plus bedonnant - comme elle le serait si elle était enceinte. Léa fait la grotesque quand elle mime le port de Marie-Claire en exagérant le côté fessu de la dame. (33)

The ladies are ecstatic over the table linen, the fine glasses, the flowered dinner service. "Léa passe

derrière elles et essuie ostensiblement les assiettes qu'elles ont touchées de leurs mains moites." (37) The awkwardness of these "évoluées de fraîche date" contrasts with the voluble antics of Pambault le Débonnaire, as he plays out his infatuation with the "perle de Kin". Sophie's sardonic eye misses nothing either and the whole scene, viewed through the critical eyes of the Pobard family, is both entertaining and also mercilessly critical of the superficiality of those who lose sight of their own identity and try to pattern themselves on a foreign culture.

Yet Paulin himself is shown up under the same uncompromising spotlight. He too had tried to prove his superiority by boasting to his friends that they, the Pobard's, had a White friend who treated them as equals. For his pains, he had been attacked verbally and physically.

> Paulin en tremble de fureur et de rage. Il shoote dans les parties nobles du petit insolent. Il est vraiment con d'avoir fait ça. Le cri que pousse l'autre est un cri de guerre - de guerre tribale - donc de guerre sainte - où l'on extermine l'infidèle. (69)

The narrator's voice is unmistakable as he makes a passing stab at tribalism and holy wars.

At another level, U Tam'Si shows up the ridiculousness of a situation where, instead of speaking in their own language, people try to speak

the language of the oppressor. Thus the *pousseur* Okana addresses Prosper in pidgin French.

> Quelques pousseurs avaient installé là leurs véhicules. Il reconnut Okana. C'est plutôt ce dernier qui lui lança un 'bonjour, papa Prosper'. Il s'enquit de sa santé et ajouta dans une vague d'enthousiasme et de reconnaissance, en français, s'il vous plaît: 'Ça fait chaud le kerr de voi un vous palé hommécommé hommé avé boulan. Ah, oui, ça fait fiélité. (Cancrelats 230)

Prosper himself does not escape the ironic barbs aimed at those who emulate their colonial masters to the detriment of their own language and culture. He, the *évolué* who has gallicized his name from Mpohba to Pobbard and who is conscious of his standing as a white collar worker, finds Okana's desecration of the French language painful to his ears. He is nevertheless flattered by the high regard in which he is held by the rickshaw men.

As the narrative progresses, the subtle manipulation of ironic perspectives shows up the discrepancy between ideals and human weaknesses. The increasing ambiguity of Prosper's situation becomes clear. He finds himself becoming more and more involved in a political movement that seeks to free the Congo from French domination and at the same time, he is caught up in a turbulent affair with Aimée Volange, wife of a French administrator. Aimée encourages him in his political activities and at the

same time pushes him to better both his and Paulin's education - in terms of French educational standards. She helps Prosper to pass his French *Baccalauréat* and she takes Paulin away with her to continue his education in France. All the contradictory tensions contained in this process of *acculturation* are summed up in Prosper's thoughts as he sees his son off at the airport: "Il faut être civilisé à coups de rupture." (Les Phalènes 114)

The author-narrator's ironic perspective reveals the paradoxical forces governing the thoughts and actions of Prosper or Sophie or Judge Poaty. It shows them as complex beings, whose behaviour is often inconsistent and whose words and actions are open to widely different interpretation.

As an empathetic and yet ironic eye-witness, U Tam'Si perceives and recreates the essential elements of a particular society at a given time. His fictional portrayal of this reality is based on ethical and cultural tenets which, it is assumed, the reader understands and shares. In much the same way, the traditional story teller shared a sense of common understanding with his audience and it is illuminating to place U Tam'Si's prose in this perspective. Apart from the occasional translation of Vili expressions, he feels no compulsion to explain what would be obvious to anyone familiar with Congolese custom and socio-political history.

Moreover, the assumed cultural and ethical value system provides the foundation for certain didactic implications. These become clear as the tale unfolds and the protagonists follow their painful path towards understanding the meaning of personal identity in terms of the collective whole.

The didactic element of U Tam'Si's narrative discourse can be better appreciated if seen in terms of the oral narrator's close rapport with his audience. Much has been written about the functional role of traditional art, with a tendancy to over-emphasise the didactic or ritual elements at the cost of aesthetic and entertainment considerations.

However, U Tam'Si himself specifically refers to the didactic aspect of oral story-telling, when recalling the *veillées* of his childhood:

> Les légendes enseignaient à être brave, les contes à mieux se conduire, les devinettes et les proverbes à savoir tenir une conversation - dans une certaine mesure d'ailleurs. En effet, c'est sous l'arbre à palabres - fromager ou manguier - que s'apprenait le reste: le grand savoir - jurisprudence et rhétorique, politique aussi. (Légendes Africaines 13)

In U Tam'Si's own narrative, despite the sense of the author-narrator's all-pervading presence, there is not the overt didactic intent of the traditional narrator. The "lessons", if there are any, are implied. As the discussion of his thematic concerns

has shown, although he is a deeply committed writer, U Tam'Si does not make emphatic statements. On the contrary, he refuses to give clear-cut, simple answers. He seeks rather to explore fully the paradoxical complexity of the human condition. To what extent then, can it be said that U Tam'Si assumes a didactic role? In terms of the narrative, does the author-narrator transmit a clear message, based on a particular set of moral values?

A brief textual analysis will show that this is indeed the case. Like a sounding board to the thoughts and actions of the various protagonists, the author-narrator's viewpoint can be distinguished, so focussing on certain fundamental values.

Consideration has already been given to the way in which the narrative point of view changes, with no clear markers to indicate the transition, so that the identity of the protagonists becomes blurred. often ambiguous. It is this ambiguity that allows the author-narrator's voice to speak through, and to overlay that of the protagonists.

The following extract will illustrate this. Ndundu, returning from the cemetary after the burial of his wife, reads a letter informing him of the death of Charles de l'Escaut.

> Ndundu n'eut pas les larmes aux yeux, quand il se dit: "La mort appelle la mort." Beaucoup de choses qui pouvaient expliquer la mort de sa femme, lui restaient

> mystérieuses, insoupçonnables. Qui aurait dit que cette lettre qu'il ne s'était pas empressé de lire, aurait pu le mettre en garde! Lue plus tôt! Le destin s'amuse! Nos larmes ne nous préservent pas du pire. En se défiant du jeu, peut-être que le destin n'en ferait pas toujours à sa tête! (Cancrelats 25-26)

In the first sentence, the words "il se dit" indicate quite clearly that the thoughts are those of Ndundu, related in the third person. Yet as the passage progresses, there is a subtle change of style, as if the narrator's voice overlays that of Ndundu, so adding a wider, more authoritative dimension. Another brief extract illustrates this further:

> Si l'air du pays indisposait, parce qu'irrespirable, s'en aller en se bouchant les narines - comme quelqu'un que l'on mène par le bout du nez - non, ce n'est pas raisonnable! On a le temps de s'étouffer d'ici la mer.... Et les quolibets de ceux qui verraient.... Passent les quolibets.... Mais d'ici la mer.... Tu vois le sable, crois-tu que la mer soit proche? Ironie du sort, qui vous met dans une impasse les yeux ouverts! (Cancrelats 44)

The theme of malaise suggests the thoughts of Ndundu, who has difficulty in establishing himself in his native surroundings after many years in Europe. Yet the stylistic juxtaposition of the colloquial and the more formal, literary elements suggests a dual perspective. In particular, the expression "l'air du pays" echoes the title of the chapter, "l'air du temps", so introducing a play of allusion and

connotation. Furthermore, the variation in personal pronouns is signifcant; the third person "on", used in colloquial language with reference to self, and the personal "tu", become the more formal "vous" in the last line. The changing register brings with it a change in perspective; the axiomatic voice suggests that of the author-narrator.

The message conveyed by the narrator-author's voice as it permeates the text, speaking through or overriding the voice of the protagonists, is not overt or dogmatic. Nevertheless it is possible to discern a pattern in the interventions and this is reinforced semiologically in the text by the ideo-images.

An example of this is the existential "lesson" that life is a long and arduous path. If followed through the narrative, from Les cancrelats to Ces fruits si doux, a consistent point of view can be discerned, first expressed by Ndundu, Prosper's father, and later by Prosper himself and then by Luambu, Sophie and Gaston. The path becomes an important ideo-image, structuring the narrative and reinforcing the message.

An essential element of a traditional oral performance is the participation of the audience. In Myth in Africa, Isadore Okpewho refers to this dynamic interplay between the narrator and his audience and contrasts it with that of the silent European

listener. Such silence would, in Africa, be considered "boorish", or a sign that the listener is incapable of participating; that he lacks understanding and feeling.[22]

In U Tam'Si's narrative the sense of a live audience is conveyed by a particular stylistic feature that is disconcerting for the Western reader. This is the sudden intervention of the author-narrator who, in the middle of a passage of third person narration, addresses the reader-audience directly, as if speaking to a real presence. A previous scene or episode will be referred to by an appeal to the reader's memory: "Vous vous souvenez de...?" or, "Vous connaissez Mahata Longani? Eh bien, c'est elle,..." or again:

> Souvenez-vous qu'il avait répondu à Mahata qui lui disait que sa femme était malade à mourir, qu'elle était mourante, "qu'il ne faisait pas de miracles", vous vous souvenez? (Cancrelats 255)

This device relates clearly to the oral narrative technique whereby the audience, having no written text to refer back to, needs such reminders in order to pick up the threads of the narrative.

The agility with which the narrator transposes himself from one protagonist to another has already been considered. With equal agility, he withdraws and views the characters from a distance. His empathetic rapport with them is not broken but at the same time he does not gloss over their weaknesses and he will

sometimes point these out explicitly to the reader.

For example, the reader's attention is focussed on Sophie's habit of expressing herself by means of maxims and parables, the full significance of which she does not always understand: "Mais allez demander à Sophie pourquoi cette parabole, sait-elle seulement ce qu'elle pourrait répondre?" (Cancrelats 182)

The narrator may also intervene, to defend his character from unduly harsh judgement on the part of the reader:

> Ne reprochez pas aux hommes ce qu'ils sont, même quand ils ne savent plus être eux-mêmes, surtout quand l'agonie leur donne une foi précaire, un sauf-conduit illusoire.... Etait-il inutile que Prosper se prenne soudain, comme ça, au sérieux, allant jusqu'au délire? ... Pouvait-il expliquer à Juliette le sens de ce qu'on lui demandait? (Cancrelats 301-2)

Yet another form of intervention on the part of the narrator is significant; this time a piece of "objective " description develops into a personal memory shared with the reader. Imperceptibly, in the middle of a paragraph, in mid-sentence, the third-person narration becomes "vous":

> Un ramier ajustait son chant, puis la plaine se cambrait et, par bonds, piquait une tête au fond d'une étroite vallée. La vallée rejoignait la crevasse par là. Sur l'autre flanc de la vallée et jusque-là, sur le sommet, vous le voyez le défilé des manguiers? Là-bas se trouvait l'ancienne ville, il n'a pas des années. Tournez le dos au soleil: vous sentez la mer. Revenez maintenant sur vos pas en obliquant toujours sur la gauche, soit que vous montiez, soit que vous descendiez, vous avez les yeux sur les criques.

> Si le vertige vous prend, sauvez-vous, sauvez votre vie. Dans l'air épais, on entend des voix s'interpellent. Ecoutez. Ah! ces cigales! (Cancrelats 184)

The narrator, describing a region familiar to himself, is carried away by the vividness of his personal memories and he communicates his love for that piece of landscape directly to his audience. Such a detailed evocation of landscape is rare - usually natural elements, such as rain, wind, or mud, are portrayed for their connotative or symbolic value. In this instance, the description plays no specific semiological role; the narrator digresses for the pure joy of reliving a personal experience. A similar interlude, a graphic description of the station in Brazzaville, begins with the assumption that the reader is familiar with the scene: "Vous connaissez la gare de Brazzaville, elle n'a de gare que le nom." (Cancrelats 229)

At times the narrator intervenes to offer a word of explanation to the reader. He may feel it important that the reader understand the geneological roots that link the characters:

> Jean Taty. Taty, ce n'était pas le nom de son père. Voici une courte branche de son arbre généalogique ... (Cancrelats 155)

Sometimes the narrator is aware that the reader may well need a specifically Vili custom explained:

> ...parce qu'on ne va pas vivre là où a vécu un mort en pays vili, vous le savez?" (Cancrelats 87-8)

Or he may consider it necessary to translate a Vili expression:

> Germain s'excuse auprès du Sénateur et obtient sa permission d'ouvrir le fond de la conversation en recourant à une formule bien de chez nous, de là-bas, à Loango, que je traduirai après, qui dit: Li vusu li safu, li nuinunu li ma lafu, libululu kilungu! Le Sénateur dit qu'il n'est pas nécessaire de traduire,... (Phalènes 157)

Of interest in this passage is the easy assimilation of two narrative angles. Germain's words are initially reported in the third person but in mid-sentence, a switch to the first person is ambiguous. "Chez nous" and "je traduirai" express either Germain's viewpoint or that of the narrator or both.

At times the narrator calls upon the reader's judgement in support of his own particular interpretation. There is an underlying assumption that the reader shares the narrator's ethical standpoint. A single example taken from Les cancrelats, will serve to illustrate this feature. While Thom'Ndundu is alive, Tchiluembh is shown to be a difficult, ambiguous person. Although his complicity in their father's death, be it voluntary or not, is hinted at, it is only after Thom'Ndundu's death that any clear evaluative statement is made. We are told

that the orphaned Prosper and Sophie are "livrés à un monstre." As if in anticipation of protest from the reader, at such an unsubstantiated statement, an appeal is made to the reader's own judgement: "Jugez-en par la scène que le monstre fit à l'abbé Stanislas."(86)

At other times, the reader is invited to share the narrator's amazed disbelief at an example of human injustice or error: "Allez-vous croire que l'homme qu'il rudoyait ainsi n'était autre que son bras droit, le frère de 'mamaille' Sophie?" The scene is that of the crowd that has gathered in front of the Portuguese "Encorné's" factory. The rhetorical question is again a device of the oral story-teller. Sophie does not yet know the identity of the person being accused of theft and, by giving an advance clue to the "audience", an element of suspense is introduced, as her imminent shock and disbelief are anticipated. "Dites avec ça que la vie n'est pas navrante!" The reader is invited to share the reactions of Sophie, of Prosper's friends, and of the narrator himself.

Just as the traditional story teller had to contend with the questions and interjections of his audience, so here too the narrator answers the reader's imagined questions:

> Bien sûr que ces trois hommes se connaissaient.... Quand je dis que le troisième ne mourut pas, je veux dire cette semaine-là! Comment, pourquoi? Le savoir

> maintenant ne vous apprendrait rien de tout le curieux de l'affaire.... (Méduses 13)

Here the narrator openly enjoys his superior knowledge and tantalises the reader, arousing his curiosity and sense of intrigue. Asides such as "(Qu'est-ce qu'ils sont devenus ces deux-là?)", exclamations, the tone of easy familiarity, all these elements add up to create the sense of a close, immediate rapport with the reader.

> Dans les bagages de Prosper, il y avait des tôles! Qu'est-ce qui vous étonne? Dans les bagages de Prosper Mpob, il y avait des tôles, je disais des tôles, des planches et trois sacs dodus. Puis le camion de la Prévoyance s'en fut par les chemins. Han! han! pihi! pihi! (Cancrelats 186)

This manner of suddenly addressing the reader directly may come as a surprise. The constant metamorphosis of the narrator and intermittant personal interventions may appear awkward, perhaps a sign of incomplete mastery of the art of writing. However, when the narrative is read in the light of the oral story-teller's techniques, the apparent inconsistencies are explained. It is the narrator's constant presence that maintains the narrative link through the many episodes that make up the epic tale.

VI

There remain two further aspects of U Tam'Si's narrative style which acquire special significance when considered in the context of the oral tradition. These are the wide range of register or tone and the use of proverbs and aphorisms.

The easy transition from the poetic to the dramatic or to the epic genre naturally gives rise to an expressive mode ranging from the rhetorical to the conversational. Of particular interest is the change of register which may take place in a single paragraph or even a single sentence. The following passage from Les cancrelats illustrates a characteristic stylistic feature:

> Prosper travaillait à sa clôture avec beaucoup d'énervement, il jurait, injuriait soit le bois pourri, soit le canif à la lame pourtant très tranchante.
>
> Malila était partie de bonne heure en prétextant une visite inopinée chez son vieil oncle. "Encore!" Mais tailleras-tu, bougre de canif à la con! Prosper faillit se tailler une bonne plaie, jugea-t-il à ce mouvement très brusque du canif, frôlant son bras!
>
> - Tu en as déjà assez fait ce matin! L'entêtement...
>
> O Sophie, tu te laisseras donc toujours aller à percer des abcès, qui se plairont toujours à te jaillir au visage. Leur pus est donc si réconfortant?
>
> Que l'énervement de Prosper éclate en colère, ça se comprend. Mais que cette colère dise des choses inattendues, comment faire pour se boucher les oreilles, et ne pas les entendre? Le réconfort, c'est que Prosper semblait maintenant s'adresser à quelqu'un d'autre que Sophie. A d'autres. Et Sophie put, sans honte, essuyer sur son

> visage le premier jet de pus qui fut pour elle.... Elle écoutait, la tête appuyée contre son désarroi. Et Prosper vomissait ses paroles. (205-6)[23]

In the space of a few lines, the prose moves from the finely balanced rhythm of "il jurait, injuriait soit le bois pourri, soit le canif ..." to the colloquial, even vulgar, "bougre de canif à la con!" A moment later, the tone is rhetorical: "O Sophie,...?" The metaphor is at once graphic and literary, and is sustained into the paragraph that follows. It contrasts with the lyrical beauty of, "Elle écoutait, la tête appuyée contre son désarroi."

Such rapid changes of register can be traced throughout U Tam'Si's narrative. It is a far cry from the classical Western concept of unity, both of form and style and it echoes more closely the oral story teller's performed tale, where the dramatic presentation of the different characters demands a constant metamorphosis of tone and style.

It was mentioned at the outset of this chapter that, while it is helpful to view U Tam'Si's prose through the prism of the oral tradition, to take the analogy too far runs the risk of distortion. U Tam'Si was a product of twentieth century Africa, educated for the most part in the French school system and trained in the written literary tradition. While his narrative may echo many elements of the oral tradition, these are tempered by the imperatives of

prose writing. This blending of literary and oral techniques is particularly well illustrated in the way U Tam'Si makes use of the proverbial or axiomatic mode of expression. The characters, as well the narrator, speak and think "par paraboles".

A closer contextual analysis of some of the proverbs and maxims shows that U Tam'Si is not merely transmitting a traditional mode of expression. Nor is it a device to portray a characteristically "African" way of speaking, or to satisfy the reader's taste for the exotic. In the previous chapter it was seen how the proverb structures the text. Here it will be shown that proverbial speech is used creatively to convey a specific world view.

It is helpful to preface this investigation into U Tam'Si's use of proverbs by considering what other African writers and critics have to say on the subject. For Léopold Senghor, the proverb is an essential element of the African way of thought and expression. Today, this proccupation with defining a specifically African mind is viewed with caution if not suspicion. Furthermore, many a contemporary African writer would have difficulty with Thomas Melone's statements regarding the role of traditional artistic expression. It is worth quoting at length from an article published in Présence Africaine, which illustrates the Francophone writers' thinking during the sixties:

> Or lorsque l'artiste se présente devant ce monde de symboles qu'il va nommer, il se présente les mains vides, ne possédant rien: il n'est propriétaire ni des symboles, ni de l'organisation du discours en ce mouvement dit proverbial. Il n'invente rien de ces proverbes, de ces aphorismes, de ces tours, qui existent avant lui, en tant qu'héritage philosophique, oratoire, juridique, métaphysique légué par les générations antérieures et s'offrant à lui dans une forme définitive et figée qui ne laisse plus aucune initiative, aucune liberté à sa capacité d'invention technique et même thématique. Il doit se soumettre à la loi "iconographique" des proverbes. Et si à la fixité iconographique de la structure, s'ajoute bien **mutatis mutandis** la multiplicité "dynamosplastique" des thèmes, celle-ci est en principe déterminée par le désir allusif du peuple collectivement considéré et non par le génie créateur de l'artiste individuel.[24]

Melone goes on to quote Achebe's work as an example of language that is entirely proverbial or allegorical. The only individuality that Melone seems to allow is the artist's "génie de sélection", which supposes a profound understanding of the proverbial expression "dans ses constituants, dans sa signification, dans ses qualités plastiques et féériques, dans son 'au-delà' de la masse symbolique."(18)

To view the use of proverbs by a modern writer such as U Tam'si as evidence of his submission to proverbial "iconographic" laws, would be to ignore both the artist's individuality and also the complexity of his cultural heritage.

Proverbial expression is indeed a feature of much Anglophone and Francophone African prose writing. However, this discussion of U Tam'Si's use of proverbs or *la devise*, is confined to the more immediate context of the Congolese cultural milieu.[25]

Contemporary researchers in the Congo have indicated the high incidence of proverbial expression by Congolese novelists writing in French.[26] Makouta-Mboukou has widened his field of reference and has categorised the proverbs appearing in well-known Francophone and Anglophone novels, such as Une vie de boy by Oyono, Les contes d'Amadou Koumba by Birago Diop or Things Fall Apart by Achebe. Critics are generally agreed that proverbial speech is the concrete expression of the writer's link with the collective experience of the past; proverbs are seen to express the wisdom of the ancestors.

Théophile Obenga however, makes an important reservation with respect to the moral dimension of proverbial expression. It is tempting to analyse the rich store of proverbs to be found in African literature with a view to discovering African ethical and metaphysical systems. However, this critical approach is problematic, since it views the literary text as some kind of socio-historical document. Théophile Obenga distances himself from those:

> ethno-psychologiques qui conduisent, au mieux, à la psychologie sociale, collective, et nullement

> à la philosophie dont l'ambition est de connaître (et d'enseigner) ce qu'est tout être en réalité et en vérité.[27]

Because proverbs apply to a multitude of concrete situations, they belong to the world of "obligations contingentes"; they do not constitue a philosophical system. In his most recent publication of traditional Mbochi literature, Obenga insists on the functional value of the proverb: it expresses a specific moral value applicable to a particular situation.

Interestingly, Roland Barthes makes a similar point in his essay "Le mythe, aujourd'hui".[28] The popular proverb, as opposed to contemporary bourgeois mythology, is part of what he calls a "langage-objet". It retains a real link with the world.

> Le proverbe populaire, ancestral, participe encore d'une saisie instrumentale du monde comme objet.... Tous nos proverbes populaires représentent de cette façon une parole active qui s'est peu à peu solidifiée en parole réflexive, mais d'une réflexion écourtée, réduite à un constat, et timide en quelque sorte, prudente, attachée au plus près à l'empirisme. Le proverbe populaire prévoit beaucoup plus qu'il n'affirme, il reste la parole d'une humanité qui se fait, non qui est.[29]

It is furthermore, not enough to note the incidence of proverbial expression in contemporary prose. With respect to U Tam'Si's novels therefore, proverbs and *la devise* are looked at in order to ascertain how this traditional oral form functions in

a modern written text. From this it can be seen whether U Tam'Si transposes unchanged the "héritage philosophique" of which Melone speaks, or whether he modifies it according to the imperatives of his individual creative expression.

The proverbial manner of speaking is strikingly illustrated in the novels by the politician, Pierre Tchiloangou, whose speech on "Hier dans les pas de demain" is "truffé d'une foule d'aphorismes" so that even Prosper has difficulty in following his argument. (Phalènes 116-7) While not all the characters use proverbial expression to the same extent (Tchiloangou's speech consists of a page and a half of proverbs), a catalogue of proverbs appearing in the narrative would reveal a high incidence. However, such a catalogue would not elucidate their significance as a literary technique.

It is important to bear in mind that the fundamental theme that holds the four novels together is the search for understanding. The corollary of this is the difficulty of putting into words truths that are understood intuitively or which are only half-understood. "Les mots ne sont pas faits pour décrire les choses qui sont des essences," says Prosper in Les phalènes and this resumes one of U Tam'Si's major literary concerns. One is again reminded of Funzi's thought: "Identifier une chose, c'est limiter ses possibilités." U Tam'Si's

characters themselves recognise the futility of trying to give definitive, clear-cut answers.

It is the epigramatic form, which may be a traditional proverb or the writer's own original creation, that provides a solution to the dilemma. The message or the idea contained in the proverb is highly condensed and, at the same time, it is open-ended, allowing for multiple interpretation or application. The enigmatic or paradoxical form of expression contained in the aphorism reflects the essentially dialectical and ambiguous nature of truth.

This is made quite explicit in the following passage, where Sophie has recourse to a proverb in order to express her meaning to Juliette. Aimée Volange, who has recently been showing signs of edginess, had invited Juliette and Prosper to dinner the evening before. Juliette gives an account of it to Sophie:

> Juliette raconte tout, Sophie ne perd aucun détail. A la fin, elle dit un mot qui n'est pas le mot de la fin. "Quand l'eau n'est ni froide ni chaude, il ne faut pas se demander pourquoi elle n'est pas tiède." Elle laisse cette énigme suspendue au-dessus du silence de leur écoute de la sourde rumeur de la ville où quelque part Prosper fait quelque chose qu'elles ne trouveront jamais répréhensible. Quoi qu'il fasse. (Phalènes 187)

It is precisely through all that is left unsaid that the full significance of the episode is conveyed.

At moments of dramatic intensity in the narrative, the action is invariably interrupted by a proverb or an epigramatic observation, which introduces a wider and deeper dimension. It is a way of recognising that understanding is only partial. An individual's view of what is truth represents only one angle; there will always remain a part that is hidden. What is intuitively understood cannot be fully explained in simple, unambiguous terms. It is the dialectical form of the proverb that is best able to express the paradoxical nature of complex truths.

For the average Western reader, proverbs are little more than a form of metaphorical expression. In the words of Roland Barthes, they are part of a "méta-langage", "un langage second qui s'exerce sur des objets déjà préparés."[30] They have been relegated to the role of banal commentary on everday experiences, a means of stating the obvious, often with humourous or ironc intent. The wording is fixed and conveys a single idea which, while it may require explaining to the child or the foreign speaker, is readily understood. Indeed, the importance accorded to originality in Western aesthetics would designate the repeated use of proverbs as evidence of a trite or even hackneyed form of expression.

In contrast to this, the enigmatic utterances of U Tam'Si's characters are often disconcerting. Like much of his poetry, the full significance is not

immediately accessible. Certainly U Tam'Si does not explain or tease out the meaning and often it is important to have some knowledge of the cultural and linguistic context in order to understand their meaning. Furthermore, the significance of a saying or an aphorism often becomes apparent only much later in the narrative, for U Tam'Si's creative expression works on an extended scale.

Yet the use of proverbs does not derive from a conscious wish to mystify. The reader must be patient, understanding that the proverb is neither a cliché expression of the commonplace nor a simple metaphor. It expresses a complex, open-ended idea, the significance of which is not always immediately evident. Indeed, the characters themselves frequently do not fully understand the import of a proverb that comes to mind, almost unbidden.

A further source of possible confusion for the reader who is unfamiliar with U Tam'Si's fiction, is the fact that a proverb may appear in a variety of forms, sometimes given in full and sometimes alluded to by a word or two. Two versions of the same proverb may even appear to be contradictory. For example, the key proverb quoted in proem to Les cancrelats, "Le cancrelat alla plaider une cause au tribunal des poules!" is referred to in Les phalènes as "le dicton des cancrelats qui **refusent** d'aller demander justice au tribunal des poules...." (74 emphasis added)

However, the essential meaning of the proverb is the same: what justice can a cockroach expect from a tribunal of hens? It is the iror of the situation that is important, whether it be conveyed by an exclamation mark or a negative verb form.

Similarly, in Les cancrelats an important proverb appears not only in a variety of forms but also in apparently unrelated contexts. Early on in the narrative, it is alluded to by Tchiluembh: "Il y a la solitude du tam-tam qui est sous l'auvent." (29) Ndunda reacts immediately; he knows the proverb and understands at once the significance of what Tchiluembh is saying. The reader must wait for some long time before discovering the proverb in full. This time it is Funzi who thinks it and it is given in Vili. The translation, both literal and in a more intelligible form, is given in a footnote: "Sous l'auvent, le tam-tam est toujours seul." (107) However, it is again not clear how the proverb relates to the context; Prosper has just crossed the courtyard and, without replying to his sister's question, asks Pauline where her husband is. When the proverb appears for the third time, it is again Funzi who utters it and once more it is apparently unrelated to the context - Fehlianu and Mbissi have just begun to play at riddles. However, what follows provides a clue which, in retrospect, throws light on the previous episodes:

> Tout le monde prêta l'oreille discrètement, un soupir unanime souligna la justesse de l'observation de Funzi. "Le tam-tam est seul sous l'auvent." Fehlianu qui n'avait pas envie de sentir sa solitude, s'acharna sur la petite Mbissi. (138-39)

The notion of solitude illuminates not so much the immediate action but the situation of certain characters; their relationship with their fellows. To return to Ndundu and his brother, it can be seen that the proverb highlights Ndundu's isolation, intensified by Tchiluembh's underlying resentment at the return of his younger, apparently more successful brother. With respect to Prosper and Sophie, the proverb emphasises that they both stand out from amongst their peers; they are both loners. Funzi too, plagued by her ugliness, cuts herself off from her fellows by her sardonic, bitter thoughts.

When the proverb makes its last appearance, in a different form, the reader is now prepared to appreciate fully its suggestive powers. This time it is the old uncle of Malila, Prosper's new wife, who says: "Pleure, toi qu'on aime sous l'auvent." (Cancrelats 203) The implications are far-reaching and the tragic conclusion to Malila's marriage is anticipated. For Malila, an orphan, marrying Prosper had opened up a new life, but enigmatic comments such as, "Et Malila qui n'osait plus rire, mâchonnait ses sourires.... " suggest that all is not well. It was Sophie who had encouraged her brother to marry and who

had proposed Malila but she too seems troubled and her remarks are heavy with hidden meaning. Malila has been "taken in under the porch" but the reader's feeling that all is not well is confirmed: "Cry, you who are loved beneath the shelter." When the tam-tam is put out under the shelter, is one concerned with it or with oneself? Malila asks herself. What prompted Sophie to encourage the marriage? Concern for Malila? or for herself? or for Prosper? Is Malila a pawn in Sophie's complex relationship with her brother?

In fact, Malila becomes increasingly estranged and dies mysteriously. Her death marks the end of a chapter: "Voici le frère et la soeur à un carrefour." They both leave Diosso, the house is abandoned. Malila and her tears are a thing of the past:

> Malila (les pleurs) est morte... signifie qu'on ne versera plus de larmes. Est-ce une promesse ou encore l'augure d'une dérision? (224)

When the next section begins, nine years have passed, Prosper has remarried and is living in Brazzaville. Sophie is coming to join him and his family. Again, it is to be a three-cornered relationship; Prosper, his wife and Sophie. It is significant that the tam-tam proverb does not appear again. In fact, both Prosper and Sophie enter a new phase. Prosper is to become increasingly committed politically and he is forced to face up to the

responsibilities of his relationship to Juliette and the children. Sophie too must reconcile her own situation, accepting a supportive rather than commanding role in her brother's house. Their increasing involvement with others brings to an end their isolation: they are no longer "sous l'auvent" but within the house itself.

This lengthy exposé of a proverb serves to show how U Tam'Si has taken an element of his oral heritage and developed it in his own way. In his narrative discourse, the proverb or aphorism is much more than a reflection of the traditional manner of speaking. This stylistic device takes on a semiological role and becomes an integral part of the thematic development.

It has been said that the proverb or aphorism gives concrete expression to an abstract idea and

U Tam'Si has taken this even further. The "tam-tam beneath the porch" connotes graphically the real, every-day world. At the same time, it conveys not only an evaluative perception at a specific moment in time but also contributes to the development of essential themes.

Far from being restricted by the rigid form of traditional sayings, U Tam'Si reworks them, giving them a new interpretation and also developing their aesthetic or literary value.

Another example illustrates this extensive development. It is taken from Les phalènes and

Prosper is listening to Pambault le Débonnaire recounting how he has been searching everywhere for Jeanne, his "perle de Kin."

> Un papillon se prend les ailes dans la flamme qu'il a eu la témérité d'agacer de trop près. Ce papillon-là est une phalène à robe cendre et velue. C'est que la phalène a le vol lourd. Veuve de la gracilité qu'elle a pu avoir en un temps autre. La cendre sur sa robe, les ailes et le corps, est-ce la fréquentation intempestive ou abusive du feu, des flammes.... Le comble de la maladresse. Un lac, tu pêches - tu ne peux pêcher que sur les bords, c'est quoi? La réponse est: **si tu veux te réchauffer, ne te jette pas au coeur du brasier.** Ce n'est pas Pambault qui suit la pensée de Prosper. Ça ne peut pas être Pambault qui, ayant surpris ce que Prosper se dit en lui-même, a fait surgir on ne sait trop d'où cet essaim de papillons de nuit et qui sarabandent maintenant autour de la lampe. Pambault questionne: "Tchimaké?" Prosper, surpris, demande: "Quoi?" Pambault traduit: "Un présage?"
>
> Prosper se racle la gorge.
>
> Et si c'est cela que nous sommes, à tourner autour d'une flamme qui fume, qui nous pique les yeux, qui nous prend la vue, si bien que nous ne savons plus où nous en sommes, si bien que nos ailes s'y brûlent. Les ailes, celles de notre ange gardien. (78: emphasis added)

The proverb which is the answer to the riddle, takes us back to the similar riddle game played by Fehlianu and Mbissi in Les cancrelats. Here it is given considerable new dimension. Its association with the moths fluttering around the flame of the lamp gives portrays graphically one of the central themes of the novel and of the narrative as a whole. Are Pambault, Prosper, Sophie, Gaston and the others no

more than moths, blinded by an irresistable, even fatal fascination for a woman? an ideology? a brother? a sister? To what extent should one commit oneself? Is one perhaps throwing oneself into the heart of fire? Should one keep to the edge of the lake?

In this new context, the proverb's field of reference is widened and it is also developed poetically, in association with the moth image. The lyrical prose composes an image of great beauty, working through parallelisms, tertiary and binary structures and the play of assonance and alliteration. This is the work of a creative artist, no mere imitator of tradition.

The poetic quality of this and other proverbial expressions removes them from the realm of mere pithy sayings or maxims. Starting from a point of concrete experience, it allows for a subtle exploration of further existential dimensions.

Upon analysis it has become clear that certain elements of U Tam'Si's narrative style are closely related to the story-telling techniques used by the oral narrator. It would be hazardous to estimate whether this reflects an unconscious debt to his cultural inheritance or a deliberate adaptation of traditional narrative forms. Perhaps Gaston's words, as he stumbles painfully along his way in Ces fruits si doux, reflect the thoughts of the author:

> Cette histoire est proche d'un conte dont les mots affleurent par moments, malgré la tourmente que connaît sa mémoire. (258)

However, to answer this question would entail an investigation fraught with insurmountable difficulties for who, least of all the author, is able to identify the motivating source of creative inspiration? In the final analysis, the value of such an approach is questionable for, while of interest with regard to the mechanisms of creative writing, it does little to clarify the inner dynamics of the text itself. Nor can the psychoanalysis of any one writer offer the basis for a more general aesthetic theory. In the field of African literature, such an attempt to generalise would run the danger of falling back on the Senghorian concept of the "African mind".

The textual analysis of U Tam'Si's narrative in the light of the oral tradition as undertaken in this chapter aims not so much to explain the writer as to illuminate his writing and to make it more accessible to the reader, whether of a Western, African or mixed cultural heritage. Certain apparent inconsistencies or stylistic "awkwardnesses" in the novels can be explained when read in the light of traditional oral story-telling techniques. Furthermore, this required shift in critical perspective opens up new dimensions and releases the full dynamic force of the prose.

Many aspects of the relationship between orality and U Tam'Si's narrative are relevant to contemporary African prose writing in general. The oral tradition is therefore a crucial element of an African literary aesthetic.

NOTES

1. Théodore Mayi Matip, "Pour un renouveau des chefferies traditionnelles," Bingo 410 (mars 1987) 54-55.

2. Isidore Okpewho, Myth in Africa (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1983).

3. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, interview, Fraternité Matin (6 janvier 1981).

4. Sony Labou Tansi, interview, "Je n'ai pas besoin de prix, j'ai besoin de justice," Bingo 374 (mars 1984): 70-72.

5. Myth in Africa 93

6. Tzvetan Todorov, Poétique de la prose (Paris: Seuil, 1971) 70.

7. Littérature traditionnelle des Mbochi 12. With respect to the oral origins of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, Obenga cites as his sources Jacques Nathan and Jean Beaugrand, Les Littératures de l'Antiquité classique (Nathan 1957) and Ch. Letourneau, L'évolution littéraire dans les diverses races humaines (Battaille et Cie 1984). It is interesting to note that he makes no reference to the research into "the Homeric question" by Milman Parry and Albert Lord.

8. Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Le réalisme d'Amadou Koumba" and "D'Amadou Koumba à Birago Diop," Liberté 1 Négritude et humanisme (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964) 175-180, 241-251.

9. Léopold Senghor, "Comme les lamantins vont boire à la source," Poèmes (Paris: Seuil, 1984) 155-68. See also Jean Cauvin's exposition of traditional rhythmic patterns discussed in Part One, Chapter Two.

10. Littératures traditionnelles 11-44

11. Nathalie Sarraute, L'ère du soupçon (Paris, Gallimard, 1956).

12. The following passage illustrates how Sarraute conceptualises the subtle play of "sous-conversations":

    Le lecteur, sans cesse tendu, aux aguets, comme s'il était à la place de celui à qui les paroles

s'adressent, mobilise tous ses instincts de défense, tous ses dons d'intuition, sa mémoire, ses facultés de jugement et de raisonnement: un danger se dissimule dans ces phrases douceâtres, des impulsions meurtrières s'insinuent dans l'inquiétude affectueuse, une expression de tendress distille tout à coup un subtil venin. L'ère du soupçon (Paris: Gallimard, 1956) 122.

13. Ruth Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) 108.

14. Isidore Okpewho, Epic in Africa (New York: Columbia UP, 1975) 34.

15. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, Le Zulu suivi de Vwène le fondateur (Paris: Nubia, 1977).

16. Seydou Badian, La mo t de Chaka précédé de Sous l'orage (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1963); Djibril Tamsir Niane, Sikasso ou La dernière citadelle suivi de Chaka (Paris: P J Oswald, 1971).

17. James A.Notopoulos, "Parataxis in Homer" in Transactions of the American Philological Associatio. 80:5-6 quoted in John M. Foley, The Theory of Oral Composition (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana U.P., 1988) 59.

18. Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy (London: Methuen, 1982).

19. "La quête du récit," Poétique de la prose 129-50.

20. Mohamadou Kane, "Sur les 'formes traditionnelles' du roman africain," Revue de littérature comparée 48 (1974): 563

21. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, interview, "Tchicaya U Tam'Si: entre le rire et le chant," Afrique 57 (juillet 1966): 43-44.

22. Myth in Africa 81.

23. The image of intense but hidden antagonisms, released by a word or expression, so that pent up feelings spurt out like a spray of pus, echoes a favourite metaphor of Nathalie Sarraute, particularly evident in her early novels Martereau and Le planétarium. Compare, for example, these extracts from Martereau: "Il rit d'un de ces rires dont on dit - et l'expression est juste - qu'ils vous font froid dans le dos, il va souffler son jet corrosif ... il siffle....

Des cloportes, des bêtes répugnantes qui rampent dans l'ombre humide parmi d'immondes odeurs, c'est ce que nous sommes, elle et moi, tandis que son pied nous traque, nous écrase; le liquide nauséabond qui gicle de nous lui soulève le cœur." (112-3)

24. Thomas Melone, "Critique littéraire et problèmes du langage," Présence Africaine 73 (1970): 3-19.

25. According to Professor August Miabeto, *la devise* or the motto is a form of coded language particularly favoured by the Congolese people.

26. Bernard Nzoutani-Loumwamou, "La représentation de la tradition à travers la prose congolaise d'expression française," thèse de doctorat de 3è cycle, U de Marien Ngouabi, 1987.
Sylvain Macayo-Tchitembo, ""L'expression de la tradition orale dans les oeuvres romanesques et poétiques de Tchicaya U Tam'Si et de Tati-Loutard", thèse de doctorat de 3è cycle, U de la Sorbonne, 1985.

27. La cuvette congolaise 141

28. Roland Barthes, "Le mythe, aujourd'hui," Mythologies (Paris: Seuil, 1957) 263-4.

29. Mythologies 263.

30. Mythologies 263

CONCLUSION

Although the subject of this dissertation has been the novels of Tchicaya U Tam'Si, the study of his novelistic, and by extension his poetic discourse, has provided an entry into the wider question of critical theory and ultimately, the subject of African aesthetics. U Tam'Si's writing defies traditional, largely Western, critical criteria and so serves to highlight the need for critics of African literatures to discover more appropriate, Afrocentric methods.

In so challenging Western hegemony, however, the intention has not been to minimise the scholarship of those Western critics who have been untiring in their support for African letters. Indeed, it is for example, critics such as Lilyan Kesteloot, Robert Cornevin, Gerald Moore, Albert Gérard and others too numerous to mention, have been instrumental in bringing French-language African literatures to the notice of the Western reading public.

As it has been shown, the search for new critical perspectives, grounded in the socio-historic realities of Africa, does not presuppose a *tabla rasa* approach. On the contrary, most if not all, critical methods contribute towards understanding the multi-dimensional nature of art, be it music, the plastic arts or creative writing. At the same time, no one method is sufficient or perfect. Indeed, all systems are

reductionist, and to remain within the parameters of a specific critical school or approach is to risk impoverishing, if not deforming, the text.

A syncretic approach therefore, offers the most fruitful means of exploring modern African creative writing. Consideration of such diverse Western schools of critical thought as the structuralist, the psychoanalytic or the Marxist, shows that, in each case, certain aspects of the literary text are illuminated. This flexible approach is particularly important in view of the dual, if not multiple, culture that African writers inherit. Historical circumstances are such that Western traditions vie with African in their influence upon the cultural environment of contemporary writers.

By taking Africa as the point of departure, it has been possible to investigate the relationship between socio-historic conditions and creative expression. This illuminates the ways in which the context determines theme and form.

The reductionist effect of viewing African literatures as a homogenous body of writing has been demonstrated and is here reiterated. However, in concluding this study, it is worth pinpointing certain factors which are applicable to most, if not all, contemporary African writing. Although the main focus has been Francophone writing, the findings can be applied to works published in other European language.

Indeed, this investigation into African literatures has had the advantage of straddling the linguistic frontiers that partition Africa.

Firstly, it can be said that the predominant thematic concerns of African writers reveal a marked sense of commitment, ranging from radical *engagement* to a sense of accountability to a community or a greater collectivity. This *engagement* is reflected at the level of style and form. In particular, the reader-writer relationship differs fundamentally from that of the West. The African writer seldom indulges in introspective soul-searching but seeks to communicate with the reader, who is often perceived of as a "live" audience.

Secondly, an important aspect of the dialectical interconnectedness of writing and the socio-cultural context, concerns the relationship of the written text to the oral tradition. Contemporary African writing is at a transitional stage, between a state of pure orality and that of total literacy. The power of the spoken word remains strong, even for present generations of Africans, who have been formed in a predominantly Western educational system. The implications of this are crucial for understanding modern African prose and poetry.

Although the importance of the oral tradition for appreciating contemporary African writing has long been recognised, as yet few detailed studies have been

made of the precise ways that oral composition influences literary creation. With respect to modern poetry or drama, the distinction between written and oral expression is often blurred and the debt to tradition is more easily identified. Prose writing, however, being a uniquely written form, has provided an excellent field for investigating how oral story-telling techniques are modified and used creatively by the modern novelist.

However, formal considerations, such as the episodic structure, interventions by the author, dramatised narration, and proverbial speech, are not in themselves sufficient to illuminate African fiction, or creative writing in general. The *imaginaire*, both individual and collective, is expressed by means of images, and speech or thought patterns, that are in turn shaped within a particular linguistic, cultural and ontological environment. It is here that the concept of the ideo-image has proved to be a useful tool for analysis. It encompasses the dynamic formulation of symbolic language, that derives from the "metonymic mind". By this is meant thought patterns that perceive and express relationships between elements of the referential world, without the need for linguistic links or logical explanation. The ideo-image then, focusses on the dialectical relationship between milieu and creative expression.

When the proposed syncretic, Afrocentric critical method was applied to U Tam'Si's writing, and to his novels in particular, it highlighted a fundamental factor which is the key to understanding his, and indeed it can be said, all African creative writing. U Tam'Si, like his fellow African poets, dramatists and novelists, confronts the crucial issues of his society, recreating poetically a particular historic moment. Yet his writing is not only the reflection of collective experience. It is the expression of an individual's perception of a collective history. The ideo-images that emerge from his particular *imaginaire* reflect a historical moment mediated by his own experience of that history. The thematic thread that runs through the various stories making up the epic tale is, in a sense, epistemological; the novels enact a quest for understanding, both of self and of the human condition.

Although the detailed examination of U Tam'Si's work requires that it be set within the parameters of the Congolese socio-historic context, many of the features have wider application and are relevant for a discussion of African writing in general.

It is not enough however, to make an analysis of a particular author's creative discourse without considering the wider question of African aesthetics. Indeed, certain values or tenets emerge, which point

towards an underlying aesthetic framework. An attempt to draw these together into a tentative aesthetic theory must proceed with caution, for to speak of an "African aesthetic" risks misconceptions similar to those arising from the notion of "African personality" or the all-encompassing term, "African literature".

The existence or not of a specifically African aesthetic has been debated since the emergence of the first written texts. There are those who believe that their writing reflects universally accepted notions of beauty. Others endeavour to pinpoint factors that constitute a specifically negro-African aesthetic. Yet others identify with more narrowly defined, national or even ethnic, aesthetic values. Today there is still little consensus between the "universalists", the "negro-Africanists" and the "nationalists".

There are also those who believe it is too soon to formulate an African aesthetic with respect to written literatures. Perhaps the body of written texts is too small and of too recent a history for clear-cut characteristics or trends to be identified. Furthermore, it is difficult to take full account of the growing body of writing in African languages.

Certainly the domain of African literatures has seen, and is still witnessing, rapid changes in the relatively short period of its existence in its modern form.

Notwithstanding such reservations, it is indeed possible to isolate some common factors, which have bearing, to a greater or lesser degree, on most contemporary Francophone or Anglophone African writing. At one level, the study of U Tam'Si's writing demonstrated clearly that the way in which artistic forms develop dialectically in response to social and linguistic conditions, is pivotal to a discussion of aesthetics. Writing, and art in eneral, represent a creative reaction to history and society. An aesthetic must attempt to describe this dialectical relationship, by which society determines istic expression and artistic expression challenges iety.

owever, an essentially descriptive aesthetic imits art to a definition of its relationship to a given society and risks losing sight of the metaphysical component. The evocative power and beauty of the imagery of a writer such as U Tam'Si cannot be wholly contained within a historical or social framework.

The distinctive discourse of Tchicaya U Tam'Si or Sony Labou Tansi, or Ngugi Wa Thiongo, or Agostino Neto, shows that each artistic expression of beauty or truth hol s within it its own keys or signs, pointing the way for it to be read and understood. Each work of art creates its own structures and it functions in terms of its own inner dynamics. The individual

imaginaire is both distinct from, and interrelated with, the collective *imaginaire*.

An aesthetic therefore, cannot be a defined solely by a socio-economic framework. Nor can it normative, seeking to evaluate what is "good" writing, whether it be in terms of an idealistic conception of "Beauty" or in terms of its function within a given society.

The work of art in fact escapes the narrow parameters of measurable material or physical factors. Implicitly, it poses a question that concerns the w er, the reader and the critic, and for which there is no categorical answer. That is, a work of art evokes a philosophical enquiry into the nature of beauty. In other words, if a painting or an image is judged to be beautiful, it presupposes the question of what makes it beautiful. Is it because it expresses a universal, ideal value? or has a pleasing form? or reflects creatively a society and its aspirations?

The key factor to this metaphysical question is that beauty is nothing unless perceived to be such. The notion of communication is therefore fundamental. This implies then, that the formulation of an aesthetic must be premised by the questions of <u>how</u> art communicates, <u>what</u> art communicates and <u>to whom</u> it communicates. In this way, the dynamic, dialectic nature of aesthetics remains pivotal. The importance

of viewing art as an act of communication emerged clearly, and indeed was confirmed, by the analysis of U Tam'Si's work. His creative writing succeeds aesthetically because it communicates, at the level of context, theme and form.

Finally, an aesthetic must take account of the role of art, or more precisely, of literature. It is concerned with the reasons why people write and read creative works. What leads some to embark upon the often painful process of creation and what motivates others to explore demanding texts? Again, these questions emerge from the study of U Tam'Si's demanding and multi-dimensional writing.

There is no simple answer to this, but one of the most powerful motivating forces is undoubtedly that identified by Marcel Griaule, from his work among the Dogon people: "L'art des Dogons est une lutte contre la pourriture." The will to defy the passage of time is implicit in any creative work of art.

Furthermore, art represents an emotional, intellectual and spiritual statement. With respect to African art, or more precisely, African literatures, it can be said to be the reformulation of an experience, both personal and collective. Yet this existential statement is not definitive. The creative act represents an invitation to explore the meaning of the human condition, to search for understanding of self and of life.

Such a formulation would seem to be fundamental to an aesthetic of African literary art, where the act of writing or reading is a dialogue with *autrui* about issues that concern both the immediate collectivity and humanity. In a world where ignorance and fear lie at the root of the violent domination and exploitation of others, there can surely be no better justification for the continued study of creative expression in all its varied forms and manifestations.

APPENDIX A

BRAZZAVILLE, MAY 1991: A PEACEFUL REVOLUTION

In the course of the past few years, National Conferences have become a familiar event in Africa. They mark the end of an era, during which the establishment of single-party rule, often in the name of "the people" has progressively eroded human rights and all but destroyed the country's socio-political infrastructures. In the wake of events in Eastern Europe, "democratic winds" are sweeping across the African Continent but sadly, they are usually accompanied by widespread unrest, violent army intervention and bloodshed. This however has not always been the case and recent events in the Republic of the Congo show that the peaceful emergence of a democratic state is indeed possible.

Congo-Brazzaville is one of the smallest countries of Africa, having an area of only 342 000km^2 of which 60% is covered by forest. Very often it is confused with its much bigger neighbour Zaïre, the former Belgian Congo, whose capital Kinshasa dominates the horizon as one looks across the great Congo River from Brazzaville. For a period, as the media gave daily reports of violent conflict in Kinshasa where Mbuto Sesi Seko sought to hold out in the face of growing popular revolt, the outside world was left with a confused impression of opposing political factions, army revolt and widespread violence. This served to confirm in the minds of many the belief that the creation of independent states in Africa inevitably results in chaos. Sadly, the news that filters through is dominated by accounts of corruption, huge foreign debts, violent political unrest, famine and Aids. Yet there are success stories, such as that which unfolded in 1991 when the Congo Republic quietly got on with its own transition to democratic rule just six months before Zaïre erupted.

The following is an account of events surrounding the National Conference that took place in Brazzaville from late February to early June, 1991. It is based on observations made during a three week visit to the Congo Republic from May 19 to June 7 1991, the objective of which was to research Congolese writing. The author is therefore neither an historian nor a political scientist yet, as an eye-witness to events, is able to pinpoint some important contemporary issues that are significant not only with respect to the Congo but for the African continent as a whole.

Today the Congo Republic represents a small part of what was the Kingdom of the Kongo, one of the great African kingdoms which had dominated this central African region from the mid-16th century through to

the 18th century. Despite its reduced size, Congo-Brazzaville continued to be a significant force in pre- and post-independent Africa, in both political and cultural spheres. Brazzaville is probably best known for the role it played in the decolonisation process of Francophone Africa and more recently President Denis Sassou Nguesso served as head of the O.A.U. Congolese musicians, artists and writers have established their reputation not only in Africa and the Francophone world but also in the USA and Latin America. Given a population of only 2,2 million, the country's creative output is remarkable; of all African countries, the Congo has the greatest number of published writers per head of population, many of whom are recognised internationally and whose works have been widely translated.[1]

However, at this juncture of the Congo Republic's history, it is events in the socio-political sphere that are of most interest for the outside world.

The 1991 National Conferences was the second to be held in the Congo, the first having been called by President Marien Ngouabi from 31 July to 7 August 1972. But this one was clearly different. Called for by the Central Committee of the ruling Marxist-Leninist PCT (Congolese Workers Party), it was scheduled to run for two weeks beginning on February 25 1991: in the event it was to last for over three months during which it dominated every domain of public and private life. The initiative taken by the PCT was precipitated by events in Eastern Europe but, as the many exposés in the local papers showed, its genesis can be traced back to the very beginning of the single-party state. Indeed, contemporary events need generally to be seen in the context of the country's history since independence. The first move towards single-party rule took place in 1963 when the then President, Abbé Fulbert Youlou, was forced by the military and the trade unions to resign. The PCT was formed in December 1969 and, in the name of the socialist revolution, over the next 27 years it to was impose itself unilaterally upon the people, with all power and authority centered around the President of the Republic, who was also head of the Party. As became clear from the many personal testimonies given at the National Conference by returning exiles, the "trois glorieuses" of the 13, 14 and 15 August 1963 had been enthusiastically welcomed by the majority of Congolese workers and intellectuals. However, the progressive concentration of power in the hands of a few opened the way for abuse: nepotism, tribalism and massive corruption. By the time of the Central Committee's recommendation to review the PCT's role and programme in the light of events in the Communist world, dissatisfaction with the regime had reached its height. Yet the Party leaders seem to have lost touch with the people to such an extent that they did not

anticipate the effect of loosening the iron grip with which all opposition had been silenced. Unexpected pressure was brought to bear by the Secretary General of the Trade Union Confederation, Michel Bokamba, who until then had been one of the most powerful members of the Party. Although to be implicated himself in the misuse of public funds, this machiavellian figure took the courageous step of denouncing publicly, in the name not only of the workers but of the Congolese people as a whole, President Sassou's expropriation of power. This seems to have been all that was needed for the Conference to be hijacked by the people. Sassou retired to his presidential palace, where he remained for the duration of the Conference. The way was open to bring to an end 27 years of single-party rule and to prepare the country for a multi-party democracy.

The National Conference had been given the mandate by the PCT of ratifying the Central Committee's decision to abandon the Marxist-Leninist ideology and to lay the basis for a "*démocracie pluraliste*". All aspects of Congolese society would be represented by delegates from newly established political parties (there were more than 10 by the start of the Conference), mass and social organisations, religious organisations, students, cultural associations and various important personalities. Archbishop Monseigneur Ernest Kombo was elected President of the Presidium - a significant move in itself, in a country where the Party had, in its rhetoric at least, constantly challenged the authority and influence of the Church.

The Conference began each day at 10h00 and continued officially until 18h00, often much later. In order for businesses and administrative offices to continue to function, a continuous day was introduced: offices, banks and many shops opened at 6h45 and closed at 14h00. The daily involvement of the several hundred delegates meant that almost all areas of Congolese life were disrupted to some degree. Furthermore, the direct cost to the country was considerable, not least being the payment of a daily remuneration to all delegates; 15 000 F CFA (300 FF or R136)[2] for those who were brought in from outside the country and 6 000 F CFA (120 FF or R55) for residents of the Congo.

One of the most extraordinary features of the Conference, given the degree of repression that had existed up until a few months before, was the fact that all proceedings were relayed live over the national radio, while major debates were televised and shown the same evening of each day. In Brazzaville, from 10 a.m. onwards, the radio literally controlled the air: on street corners, from open windows of private houses, in libraries, in shops and restaurants, taxis and buses, the successive speakers

at the Conference could be heard. The proceedings were followed avidly and there was a striking degree of informed and articulate discussion among not only students and politicos, but virtually every section of society.

Across the country the live debate was taken up in the Press. Again, this marked a break with the past; the state-controlled paper Mweti and the Etumba, the mouthpiece of the Party, had allowed little scope for dissidence and La Semaine Africaine, a paper founded by the Catholic Church in 1952 and the oldest in the country, had become progressively stifled by auto- and State censorship. However, by May 1991 there were at least 17 weekly or bi-weekly papers on sale at the kiosks and on the street corners, their presence marked invariably by a small group of people reading or discussing the latest developments. The Congo is exceptional in Africa in that it claims 100 per cent literacy.[3] At independence it adopted French as the official language and all schooling, beginning at primary level, is in French. Leaving aside the complex ideological and political issues that the language question raises, the benefit of one widely spoken language of communication is evident. The events that affected the entire country could be followed and debated by all members of the population.

The National Conference was significant not only in that it allowed unrestricted, democratic participation in the national debate. The revelations brought before it were of the kind that most other countries, even the most enlightened of the so-called democracies, would not hesitate to classify as "sensitive information" or "predudicial to the State" and therefore not to be made available to the public. The various commissions appointed to investigate State structures - political, judicial, financial and social - uncovered the full extent of the PCT's maladministration. In the beginning, prominence was given to exiles who had been invited back to testify before the Commission; too numerous to mention individually by name, together they consituted an impressive group of prominent writers, former ministers who had held high office within the Party, army officers, businessmen and educationalists. Their disillusion with the way in which the revolutionary ideals of 1963 had been subverted was eloquently expressed by Henri Lopès, a leading writer, former Prime Minister under Marien Ngouabi and presently Assistant Director General of UNESCO in Paris. Their accounts of why and how they had left the country painted a grim picture of tribalism, harrassment and intrigue perpetuated within the Party. This opened the way to a seemingly endless stream of people from all walks of life who came before the commissions to give evidence of bureaucratic mismanagement and inefficiency, fraud, corruption and political

assassinations. These were not unsubstantiated accusations: documentary evidence was presented, some of which was later published in the Press. By mid-May the commissions dealing with the two most sensitive and emotive issues were ready to present their findings; these were to do with the misappropriation of public funds and political assassinations. Individual Party members were confronted with fraudulent cheques, fictitious accounts evidence of massive payments to non-existent companies and persons - in all, running into millions of F CFA. Details were given of hundreds of milliards of F CFA held in private accounts in France, Switzerland, Brazil and even, in the case of President Nguesso, in Irak. Oil reserves, which constitute the country's main asset, had been sold off up until beyond 1992 in return for huge payments into Party members' foreign bank accounts.

The full anger of the Congolese people when they discovered the extent to which the country's ressources had been drained for the personal gain of a few could be appreciated when seen in the light of the country's run-down economic and social infrastructures. In the residential and commercial centre of Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, buildings are in a state of disrepair, with broken windows and only the remnants of paint. These contrast sharply with the handful of tall, ultra-modern edifices that house the country's banks; their air of gleaming opulence belies the reality, for banks are threatened with collapse. The few tarred roads in the towns are a maze not only of pot-holes but of deep crevasses, so that vehicles from both directions veer crazily from one side of the road to the other trying to avoid the pitfalls. Few private people own cars; most of those that circulate in Brazzaville belong to the Embassies, foreign organisations, expatriots and of course, Party members. The majority of people use the battered taxis and even more battered buses. Less evident to the visitor is the state of the health services and education, where hospitals lack the most basic of equipment and supplies, schools are without desks or chairs and there are chronic staffing shortages. The Marien Ngouabi University, which as the former University of Brazzaville had an enviable reputation in Central Africa, is in a depressing state. The grossly inadequate buildings have few window panes and have not been painted in years. Most departments are housed in gloomy prefabs. A visit to a lecturer in the English Department revealed a single room, measuring at most 5m x 5m, in which two lecturers and a secretary had their desks, divided off by dust-laden bookshelves. Books are a precious possession - apart from being extremely expensive, they are difficult to obtain. Yet the university "library" is of little use: housed in two small rooms, few if any

acquistions have been made in recent years to boost the few thousand titles on the shelves.

The country's commercial sector is equally depressing: under Party control, the parastatals are at best inefficiently run, at worst corrupt and private enterprise has been stifled. One of the country's most important resources is wood, yet building wood and paper have to be imported. In fact, the frustrated Editor of La Semaine Africaine was unable to publish the next edition of his paper because there was no paper available. The Congo Republic has a foreign debt of $5 250 milliard, one of the highest in Africa per head of population. How very understandable then was the disgusted reaction of the man in the street when he heard Party Members and former Ministers called up, one after the other, to account for their "*biens mal acquis*". The litany of cars (the latest models of the most prestigious makes), of villas, of houses and of pieces of land held in both the Congo and abroad was broadcast over the radio with numbing monotony.

But even greater was the reaction to detailed accounts of how political opponents had been abducted and assassinated. Hardly a family has not been marked by the loss of a friend or relative in this way. People listened in horrified fascination to the macabre details going back to 1964 with the creation of *monopartisme* and the MNR (Mouvement National de la Révolution). Cover-ups, sham trials and hurried executions had kept hidden the truth lying behind the deaths of former leaders, disposed of to make way for their increasingly power-hungry successors; President Massamba-Débat, Cardinal Emile Biayenda, President Marien Ngouabi. After Ngouabi's assassination in 1977, political murders reached a peak as members of the Mbosi ethnic group in the sparsely populated region to the north of the country gradually imposed themselves upon the more populous and economically active Pool district in the southern region around Brazzaville. More than 300 victims were cited by name. The disappearance of many others remains shrouded in mystery.

The most striking feature of these proceedings was the restraint and tolerance shown by the delegates and the people, who seldom left their radios during these days as the assassins were called by the Conference to answer publicly to the accusations. Monseigneur Ernest Kombo was indefatigable in advocating impartiality and the right of all citizens to defend themselves. From the start of the Conference he never allowed the people to lose sight of the fact that the Conference had no legal powers: its mandate did not extend beyond building up files of evidence which would then be handed over to the appropriate legal authorities. It was Monseigneur Kombo who placed above all else the need for national

unity and reconciliation, who with admirable firmness and tact, kept the Conference on course despite the constant threat of nascent tribalism and the understandable calls for retribution. The Conference became a form of confessional, where the guilty were called to admit to their crimes and to ask for the people's pardon. Amazingly, despite the arrogant bravado with which many attempted to belittle the evidence, there was not a single incident of physical violence. Even more startling, these same people were still actively involved in party politics; some were even to present themselves for election to the interim government which would be responsible for preparing the country for democratic elections. President Nguesso himself refused to come before the National Conference. Instead, he appeared on television, declaring that he assumed responsibility for all crimes committed by all the previous governments since Independence. This sophistocal admission was seen by many as a gesture of contempt for the Conference, yet the delegates to the Conference accepted Monseigneur Kombo's plea that, for the sake of national stability, Nguesso remain until the elections as titular President of the Congo Republic, albeit stripped of all powers. The degree of rational restraint shown by the Congolese people contrasts strikingly with other countries where violence has become institutionalized and where confrontation, be it inspired by economic, cultural or political differences, is expressed in physical aggression.

The seriousness with which the people responded to the call for restraint was reflected in the absence of cheap sensationalism in the Press. In a sample of twelve different papers from that period, there are no photographs of bullet-ridden bodies, burned out vehicles, or bereived family members. Emotion is rationalised (belying the persistent cliché that Africans are emotional beings, incapable of rational thought) and dealt with through debate. In fact debate, the *palabre africaine*, is one of the greatest strengths of the Congolese people. The ability to put events into a wider, historical perspective, the concern to understand causes and the search for just solutions were evident in conversation and in newspaper articles. Strongly conflicting opinions were expressed, often with acerbity and a real sense of anger, but equally strong was the spirit of frank self-criticism. And then there is the Congolese people's ability to laugh in the face of atrocity; this is not a sign of callous indifference but a mechanism for coping with the horrors of human aberrations. On the street and in the buses people would share with delight the latest cartoon, depicting President Nguesso fleeing with his basket of *biens mal acquis*, hotly pursued by Monseigneur Kombo; or the assassinated leaders, assassins in their own right,

pleading ignominiously for their lives. People savoured with joy the freedom once again to criticise, disagree, question and debate.

The Conference finally reached closure on June 8th 1991, with the election of Monseigneur Ernest Kombo as interrum Prime Minister together with a Council of Ministers to prepare the country for democratic, multiparty elections. The extent to which the people were sickened by corruption and deceipt was reflected in what Western politicians would find an intolerable condition: every candidate to the office of Prime Minister or the Council was required to give a detailed account of his personal financial status and possessions. Again and again the call was made for a moral basis to the government of the country. The profound wish for a clean start was expressed collectively in a ritual of cleansing and reconciliation; on the final Sunday, after widely held church services, people went to the cemeteries to clean the graves. This symbolic act, a tangible reminder of those who had died during the past 27 years, was a solemn and meaningful gesture of popular unity.

The National Conference marked not only a break with the past but also a kind of suspension in historic time, a moment when the people could evaluate themselves as a body in the process of formation. It did not provide final answers; it confirmed that a modern democratic society is required ceaselessly to question and renew itself, to recognise that it is in a state of constant reinvention.

Contemporary events in the Congo have given rise to much reflection on the part of Congolese people living both at home and abroad regarding the nature of democracy and what it means in reality for Africa. The crimes committed by successive monopartist regimes in the name of popular unity have shown the danger of reducing the issue of social inequality to a question of national revolution. The *vents démocratiques* that have revolutionised Eastern Europe are sweeping strongly across Africa. They do not represent an imported concept, unfamiliar to Africans: democratic structures existed in pre-colonial Africa and need to be reinstated. Yet for the modern democratic state to emerge, they must be re-evaluated. Tribalism must be eradicated. Economic growth and the reconstruction of systems of production are a prerequisite for a truly independent and free society. Scientific and technological training are as important as ideological principles if there is to be popular participation in government, based on open and critical debate.[4]

The second important theme of reflection concerns the notion that law and justice must be anchored in the popular mind. Rights cannot be superimposed by any party or administration in the name of the people. They must be free to choose and to act. Yet this

freedom can be realised only if it is based on respect for others. Respect for the being and life of others is a quality which is felt very strongly in the Congo. In inter-personal relations there is an absence of cynicism which, far from being a sign of naïvety, is a powerful factor in a society that has been for so long subjected to repression and exploitation by successive colonial and post-independence regimes.

The modern history of the Congo shows interesting similarities to that of many independent African States who have followed the same cycle; at independence a "moderate" leader is elected with the direct or indirect support of the out-going colonial power; shortly afterwards he is deposed, usually in a military coup, with widespread support of the people; a more militant leadership takes over and gradually establishes a single-party state in the name of popular unity; in subsequent coups civil leaders are ousted and the military takes over; corruption and economic mismanagement lead to the collapse of the country's infrastructures, huge foreign debt, widespread unemployment and poverty; dissatisfaction reaches a peak leading to popular demands for a national conference and the restoration of multi-party democracy. It is here that the Republic of the Congo differs from its neighbours; the manner in which the PCT was ousted is an impressive example of how, through the process of debate rather than violent physical confrontation, conflict can be resolved and reconciliation reached.

NOTES

1. One of the main purposes of the research trip to the Congo Republic was to establish up to date bibliographies of Congolese writing in French. These run into some 400 titles published since 1954, when the first Congolese novel appeared. A preliminary investigation of unpublished writing shows that this is as rich a field as that of published writing.

2. F CFA: the Congolese franc. 50 F CFA = 1 FF (French franc). As at May 1991.

3. This is partly due to the fact that the Congo's relatively small population (2 200 000) is concentrated in the south-west of the country, along the Brazzaville-Pointe-Noire axis. It must be added however, that there is presently a crisis in education, due to lack of funds and facilities, which puts in some doubt the claim to a 100% literate population.

4. A challenging view of Africa's need to adjust in the economic, social and cultural domains, in order for her peoples to survive into the next century, is presented by a Cameroonian economist, Daniel Etounga-Manguelle in L'Afrique a-t-ell besoin d'un programme d'ajustement culturel? (Ivry-sur-Seine: Nouvelles de Sud, 1991).

APPENDIX B

TCHICAYA U TAM'SI: BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Gérald-Félix Tchicaya was born on 25 August 1931 at M'Pili, a small village not far from Pointe-Noire, in the coastal region of what was then the French Congo. His father, Jean-Félix Tchicaya was from Libreville in Gabon. Of his Congolese mother, very little is known. When he was two he was sent to live in Pointe-Noire with his father and stepmother. It was there that he received his primary education at the *école indigène* and later at the *école européenne*. When war broke out, his father was mobilised and during his absence, while the rest of the family went to Brazzaville, U Tam'Si was entrusted to the care of various relatives. After the war, his father's political activities within the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain culminated in his being elected to the Assemblée Nationale as Député for the Moyen-Congo. In 1946 Gérald, his younger half-sister Yvonne and his half-brothers accompanied their father to France, where Gérald continued with his schooling at the Lycée d'Orléans and the Lycée Janson-de-Sailly in Paris.

In later years Tchicaya U Tam'Si was to say that he had only piecemeal memories of his early childhood in the Congo, memories dominated by dazzling sun and attacks of malaria. He never really knew his mother and the absence of maternal love was to haunt him. His father he both loved and admired, allowing no-one to criticise either the career or the political choices of that first Congolese member of parliament.[1] However, circumstances were such that they did not have a close father-son relationship, something which he deeply regretted.

Although he was happy enough living in Paris, the young Gérald-Félix did not fit easily into the French schooling system and he abandoned his studies early. He was very much older than his classmates and he was further excluded from joining in with many of their activities on account of having a deformed foot, the result of an unsuccessful vaccination against polio. His reaction was to retreat into lonely isolation. He enjoyed painting and music but in the classroom he found little in the traditional French school syllabus that seemed relevant to his own experience. At home he was aware that his father, who had four children and who looked after six of his brother's, had heavy financial responsibilities. For all these reasons, Gérald left both school and the family home to make his own living in a variety of ways. He was in turn farm hand, porter, warehouse packer, newspaper seller and post-office employee.

During this period too Gérald began frequenting cafés that were the haunt of poets such as Jules Supervielle, Alain Bosquet and Robert Sabatier. A sense of alienation from both his family and his environment aroused in him a need to understand who he was; he had to situate himself, in relation to what was in many ways an alien context. It was at this time that he wrote his first poems.

Many years later, in conversation with Jacques Chevrier[2], Tchicaya U Tam'Si gave some insight into what had motivated him to start writing. It was a "sens de la déception" at seeing all around him the precious gift of life and human potential violated by distrust, pain and suffering.

> On regarde autour de soi, il y a un soupçon de bonheur tacite en toute chose et puis malgré tout il y a une sorte de violence terrible, terrifiante qui est là, qui sévit. Et,... là, je ne comprends pas. D'où la première interrogation qu'on vive, la première et l'essentielle: "Comment vivre avec tout cela?"

Writing was a form of defence in the face of his disillusionment. A first collection of poems, Le mauvais sang, was published in 1955 under the name of Gérald-Félix Tchicaya and it brought him immediate recognition as one of the most significant and most original poets of the French-speaking world. This was followed in 1957 by Feu de brousse, which was awarded the Grand Prix Littéraire de L'Afrique Equatoriale Française. A third collection of poems, A triche coeur, was published in 1960.

It was in 1957 that Gérald-Félix adopted the pseudonym of Tchicaya U Tam'Si, meaning "little leaf that speaks for its country". This was partly motivated by the fact that when his first work had been published under his real name, it had led to him being confused with his father. But the choice of a pseudonym was not motivated only by pragmatic considerations. U Tam'Si explains:

> En réalité, il a une valeur plus totémique, emblématique même. Il renseigne sur le sens que je dois donner à mon itinéraire littéraire. Une exploration. Celle du destin, d'une vie, d'une terre, de tout cela ensemble.[3]

U Tam'Si's writing career was cemented yet further when, in 1957, he began working as a free-lance journalist for SOROFOM (Société de Radio Diffusion de la France d'Outre-Mer). He adapted African tales for the radio and wrote short stories which were broadcast in serialised form. He wrote an adaptation of Thomas Mfolo's Chaka for broadcasting in 25 episodes between 1954-58 and re-arranged it as a

radio play in 1964. This was to be rewritten for the Avignon Festival and published as Le Zulu in 1977. His reputation as a playwright was further established when, in 1979, Le destin glorieux du Maréchal Nnikon Nniku prince qu'on sort was published. Le bal de Ndinga was produced posthumously by the Théâtre International de Langue Française under the direction of Gabriel Garran and was widely acclaimed in France and Africa, where it was taken on a tour in 1989.

1960, the year of independence for many African countries, was to be significant for U Tam'Si. Just ten days after the birth of his son, Patrice, he left for Kinshasa where he spent three intensely busy months, from August to October, as Editor in Chief of the Congo, the newspaper of the Mouvement National Congolais led by Patrice Lumumba. U Tam'Si greatly admired Patrice Lumumba, whom he found to be the most fascinating person after his own father, and he shared his vision of a re-united Congo. His profound disillusionment at the betrayal of Lumumba by his fellow countrymen was to be movingly expressed in Epitomé, published in 1962 and also in Le Ventre, published two years later. The leader-prophet-martyr figure, whose life is given for others, is central too to U Tam'Si's prose and theatre.

On his return to Paris, U Tam'Si was to be employed for more than twenty years at UNESCO, first as the Congolese delegate and then in the Education sector. He continued to write, publishing three more collections of poetry; Arc musical (1970), La veste d'intérieur (1977) and Le pain ou la cendre (1978). 1980 marked the start of a period during which U Tam'Si was to confirm his reputation as a prose writer. That year saw the publication of La main sèche, a collection of short stories, and Les cancrelats, the first in a trilogy of three novels. In fact, U Tam'Si had written Les cancrelats many years earlier, in the course of the years 1956 -1958 but had not been able to find a publisher. Les méduses ou Les orties de mer and Les phalènes followed shortly after, in 1982 and 1984 respectively. At his own admission, U Tam'Si would leave Paris at the weekend with a sense of relief and go out to his country house at Bazancourt near Gournay in Normandy, where he could write undisturbed and tend his rose garden. In 1986 he took early retirement in order to devote himself entirely to writing. His last novel, Ces fruits si doux de l'arbre à pain, was published in 1987.

U Tam'Si's death by heart attack on April 22nd 1988 at the age of 59 brought widespread reaction from both the literary and the official world. In Paris a farewell mass was held in St Jacques du Haut Pas and official condolences were received from the Elysée and the Director General of UNESCO. In the Congo, where U Tam'Si had received scarce recognition during his

lifetime, Pointe-Noire was in mourning for a week. While the special flight bringing back his body was awaited, a great *veillée funèbre* was held at the family house. Three religious choirs were present at the start of the funeral procession which began in the searing afternoon heat, upon the arrival of Antoinette Sassou Nguesso, wife of the President on the Republic. A High Mass was held at the church of Loango and the Minister of Culture and fellow writer, Jean-Baptiste Tati-Loutard, pronounced the funeral oration at the family graveside in the tiny Loango cemetery. Nearby, numerous marked and unmarked graves bear witness to the early French missionaries and settlers who succombed to the rigours of the equatorial climate and malaria; a fitting context for one who called himself a "Congaulois", to mark his dual cultural roots. Here U Tam'Si was laid to rest alongside his father and uncles, within earshot of the sea that he had known as a child and which was to pervade his writing.

During his lifetime, U Tam'Si was often asked what had led him to writing. A recurrent notion conveyed in his various replies was the desire to communicate. U Tam'Si had always found it difficult to engage with people, with his country, even with himself. In his quest for fraternity and love, poetry represented a means of making contact with the other, a meeting-place:

> J'essaie de rendre cette rencontre possible en parlant, non pas parce que je crois que ce que j'ai à dire est essentiel mais je pense que toute vie est irremplacable. Or toute vie doit pouvoir donner à autrui ce qu'elle est.... [4]

At the same time, Tchicays's poetry is aggressively challenging. In defence of what he called the "positive violence" of his writing, he explained that he was deliberately provocative in order to awaken people. He wanted to evoke an awareness of their alienation, of the injustices of the past that were being perpetuated all around them, of the betrayal of their country and of themselves. It was in Kinshasa, where he witnessed the tragic betrayal of the dreams of independence, that U Tam'Si had come to the realisation that, while not everyone can be a martyr for a cause, the poet has a special vocation which requires the total giving of self. He saw his own "apostolate" as being to "magnifier, privilégier le Congo". U Tam'Si expressed this notion of the giving of self through the image of the mighty Congo river which throws itself and all that it carries into the sea, so losing itself and at the same time contributing to the riches of the marine universe.

Despite more than forty years of absence from his native land, U Tam'Si was to remain Congolese to the roots of his being. Fellow countryman and writer, Sylvain Bemba, said of him:

> L'écrivain congolais qui a le plus contribué à montrer que l'on peut vivre très loin de chez soi sans subir un seul instant le déracinement ou le dépaysement culturel, et sans surtout se complaire dans une "littérature d'exil", lègue à son peuple et à l'Afrique tout entière les clés spirituelles qui ouvrent les chemins de l'identité à ceux qui savent trouver la porte correspondante.[5]

U Tam'Si militated tirelessly in the domain of African culture. He was admired as the doyen of African writing by the younger generation and, without posing as some sort of mandarin, was always ready to help and to participate in the daily battle of making one's way as a writer or artist in Paris. His last public appearance took place during the 8th Salon du Livre, in mid-April 1988. Speaking directly to young people, he urged them to engage in the only worthwhile combat, which is the fight for liberty, the *sine qua non* condition of all other conquests.

In his lifetime U Tam'Si did not receive the full international recognition he deserved as poet, novelist and playwright and he was sensitive to this. Fundamentally timid, he often reacted aggressively to real or imagined slights, never forgetting his diverse heritage, and he earned himself a reputation for being difficult. He had a caustic, subversive sense of humour which he directed against both himself and anyone he found tiresome. His impatience with officialdom was well-known and he took delight in upsetting protocol. "Il dérange tout ce qui le gêne" said his compatriot and self-proclaimed "son", Sony Labou Tansi. Yet he and all U Tam'Si's friends speak of him as a man of epicurian tastes and generous hospitality.

Tchicaya U Tam'Si was a being as dialectical and as profoundly human as his own writing. The shocked reaction of friends and fellow writers at the news of his death and the many moving tributes to him are evidence of the high regard in which he was held by the world of African letters. The following words serve as a most fitting epitaph to him. Like a second *épitomé*, they too represent a "sommaire d'une passion".[6] They were spoken on behalf of the family at the graveside at Loango by Hilaire Mounthault:

Le vent a arraché la petite feuille de son arbre comme on arrache l'enfant de sa mère. Elle s'est envolée tournoyant dans les aires.

The voice may be silenced but the the full worth of the legacy that has been left to the world of literature is yet to be realised.

NOTES

1. It is said that just before his death, U Tam'Si had begun working on a biography of his father. Nothing has as yet been made known regarding the existence of either this or the manuscript of another collection of poetry which he was writing.

2. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, interview, "A l'écoute francophone. Le livre de la semaine," ACCT in co-operation with the national radio of member countries, 1987.

3. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, interview, Afrique Elite 15 (1987): 78-79.

4. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, interview, RFI and CLEF, 1976.

5. Médiafric [Sylvain Bemba], La Semaine Africaine 1751 (28 avril-4 mai 1988): 8.

6. The words in epigraph to Epitomé, U Tam'Si's fourth collection of poems, are: "Les mots de tête pour le sommaire d'une passion."

APPENDIX C

EXTRAIT D'UN ENTRETIEN AVEC TCHICAYA U TAM'SI PARIS 1986

Monsieur U Tam'Si, en tant qu'écrivain, êtes-vous conscient d'avoir été influencé par les croyances traditionnelles?

Oui. Je pense que sans doute oui. Cela sera peut-être un peu plus évident dans mon prochain livre où, d'une façon systématique, j'ai essayé de faire que le récit des contes traditionnels soit une paraphrase du récit-fiction que j'ai élaboré. Une partie des contes que je connais, je les ai réécris comme une paraphrase de la fiction romanesque que j'ai écrite. Cela est patent. Pour ce qui est du reste de ce que j'ai écris, sans doute il y a un certain nombre de choses qui effleurent, empruntées à la tradition orale.

Et puis peut-être, la chose la plus importante c'est que tout ce que j'ai écris est oral. Que ce soit la poésie, que ce soit le théâtre, que ce soit le roman, j'ai toujours été porté vers le récit oral plutôt que le récit écrit.

Quand au niveau des mythes, peut-être que ce que j'ai élaboré du fleuve, du sel, ça c'est les mythes généraux, sans doute, que j'ai emprunté à la tradition même quand j'ai pensé que c'était moi qui les élaborais. Je suis un être humain malgré tout.

Au niveau de l'expression, est-ce que vous employez, en les modifiant paut-être, certains procédés narratifs qui relèvent du style oral?

Je vous ai parlé du modèle du récit et de tout ce que ça comprend; ce récit qui est éclaté, qui est rythmé par les silences et puis par une sorte de polyphonie, parce que la personne qui raconte dit tous les personnages. En scène, en vie, en communication, tous les personnages participent donc il n'y a pas quelqu'un qui monologue quelque part. D'ailleurs, mon premier roman, Les cancrelats, est plus marqué par ce style-là. Le récit n'est pas conduit par une personne, par quelqu'un de l'extérieur. C'est tous les protagonistes qui racontent leur histoire, c'est-à-dire la pensé , les réflexions que leur suggère leur propre histoire. Tout cela est tellement imbriqué que, sans doute, pour le lecteur traditionnel occidental, qui a besoin d'un récit linéaire, ce récit-là peut être désarçonnant. Il est foisonnant, il est plein de soupirs, de silences, de digressions surtout, parce que le discours oral est émaillé de digressions.

Et puis alors aussi, pour que les gens soient toujours à l'écoute, il y a une forme presque de répétition qui finit par créer une sorte de situation

d'incantation. Ça, je le dois à la tradition mais pas d'une façon volontaire. Je n'ai pas été chercher ça. C'est ressorti de soi-même.

Pendant que vous écrivez, au moment de la création, êtes-vous conscient de vos lecteurs?

Non. Je ne peux pas imaginer toutes les sensibilités possibles de ceux qui pourraient éventuellement lire tel ou tel de mes livres. De temps en temps quand j'écris, je me dis: "Tiens, est-ce qu'on va voir ceci? Est-ce qu'on va sentir cela?" Avec une manière de vouloir leur faire un clin d'oeil. Mais c'est tout....

Ces lecteurs, est-ce que ce sont surtout des lecteurs français?

Non, non. Pas nécessairement. Je ne pense pas que j'écrive pour un lecteur français parce que cela aurait tout à fait dénaturé mon propos. Je parle de mon pays, à ceux de mon pays, et puis à ceux qui pourraient être amenés à y habiter. Mais je n'écris pas pour un public occidental ou non-occidental. Par exemple, quand mon dernier roman, Les phalènes, a paru, j'ai reçu une lettre d'un parent mais je n'ai reçu aucune lettre de mes compatriotes. Ça ne veut pas dire que ceux qui l'ont lu l'ont rejeté, ou refusé. Je n'ai aucun témoignage là-dessus. Par contre, j'ai reçu une ou deux lettres de gens de l'Est pour qui je racontais leur histoire. Or je racontais une histoire qui se passe au bord du Congo. Ça se passe à Brazzaville, dans un temps historique bien déterminé, c'est la fin des années '50. On assiste à des gens qui peut-être se préparent à un événement, qui sera sans doute l'indépendance, mais ce n'est pas toujours aperçu comme cela. Ils ont des quêtes qui sont peut-être un dessein même du projet d'indépendance. Ce projet est peut-être dans l'air sans que les gens l'aperçoivent. C'est des choses qui se situent au Congo, soit, mais qui peuvent se situer n'importe où.

Votre oeuvre est alors de portée universelle?

Non. Je crois qu'une oeuvre doit s'enraciner en vous. Plus elle s'enracine en vous, plus elle a la chance de toucher les autres.

Mais je ne fais aucun didactisme. Je n'enseigne pas à mes compatriotes comment être un homme, comment être une femme. Je leur raconte une histoire, le plus sincèrement du monde et je pense que cette histoire est la leur. Et finalement, souvent même, des gens disent: "Mais comment se fait-il que moi, j'ai connu X?" Alors que moi, je n'ai pas connu X. Tout ce que je raconte est une fiction, c'est-à-dire c'est une chose que j'invente, bien sûr à partir d'éléments sociaux ou culturels ou même à partir de mes propres pensées.

Je pourrais dire que chacun de mes livres est d'abord une pensée qui m'a habité, qui m'a travaillé, et que j'illustre, soit sous forme de poème, soit sous forme de pièce de théâtre, ou sous forme de roman, ou de nouvelle.

Pourquoi avez-vous choisi de situer vos romans pendant l'époque coloniale? Est-ce que vous considérez cette période toujours significative à l'heure actuelle?

Simplement parce que j'ai commencé à publier les romans un peu plus tard que je n'ai publié la poésie. J'ai achevé mon premier roman, Les cancrelats, en '58. Il n'a paru qu'en '80, presque 30 ans plus tard. Quand j'ai commencé à écrire Les cancrelats, j'ai pensé faire une trilogie. Cette trilogie devait être, "Les étapes possibles d'un devenir." Il m'intéressait énormément de créer un romancero congolais où je voyais l'homme congolais immergé de la nuit et puis avancer vers la lumière et la conquête de soi. Ça c'était mon projet au départ. Malheureusement, il a été contrarié par le fait éditorial. Quand je les ai terminés en '56, '57, '58, on a refusé de les publier. Et puis alors, je n'ai plus eu le temps de m'en occuper et c'est en '79, '80 que j'ai trouvé un éditeur qui a bien voulu l'éditer Or du coup, j'ai publié cette trilogie. C'est pourquoi, bien sûr, je ne pouvais pas faire le saut. Mais de toute façon, Les phalènes ou Les méduses, même Les cancrelats, se lisent très bien en confrontation avec l'actualité.

Je n'ai pas voulu à tout prix négliger notre époque. J'ai voulu l'explorer plus tard. J'aurais même voulu préfigurer certaines choses. Les cancrelats, Les méduses, ont été conçus bien longtemps avant que l'indépendance n'arrive. Les phalènes est un livre qui s'intercale mais qui continue la trilogie. Parce que j'ai voulu faire une oeuvre qui est une continuité, qui est une durée, qui s'inscrive dans la durée.

Est-ce qu'on peut dire que le thème de cette trilogie est celui de l'homme qui cherche à se comprendre?

C'est sans doute cela Ou c'est peut-être moi qui cherche à comprendre. Comme par exemple dans Les méduses. Est-ce que des gens sains ont vraiment une santé physique et morale suffisante pour lire dans l'événement le sens de leur destin? Ça c'est mon interrogation.

Qu'est-ce qui se passe? C'est un fait divers. Deux personnes meurent. La troisième tombe dans un coma. Tout le monde se demande pourquoi. Cela paraît surprenant mais c'est un fait divers. Quand on va plus loin que le fait divers, on découvre que le premier ramasse une balle dans une grève. En fin de compte, ce n'est même pas un gréviste. Il se trouve

qu'il était là, il ramasse une balle et il meurt. Le deuxième réagit à cette mort d'une façon très violente, tellement qu'il fait un geste. Il ne fait pas attention et il meurt. Le troisième supporte mal ces deux morts et tombe dans un coma.

Ce sont des choses qui peuvent se comprendre par elles-mêmes. Mais il y a deux entendements. Il y a ceux qui y voient l'amorce d'une révolte et qui redoutent que cette révolte éclate et entraîne tout le monde dans la catastrophe. C'est les plus lucides mais c'est les plus lucides qui ne vont pas plus loin, qui ne tirent pas les conséquences de leur lucidité. Ils parlent du hasard. Et puis il y a la majorité, ceux qui prennent peur parce qu'ils voient dans cet événement-là quelque chose qui peut les menacer.

Normalement, ces trois personnes n'auraient pas dû se connaître parce que ils ne sont pas de la même ethnie. Mais il se trouve que tous les trois sont presque dans les maillons d'une chaîne qui échappe à leur propre destin. L'un est conducteur de locomotive de chemin de fer qui ramène du bois. Le bois est exporté, et le troisième travaille dans l'exportation du bois. Donc ils ne sont même pas reliés par leur propre volonté mais par la volonté coloniale.

Au lieu de comprendre tout cela, les gens crient à la sorcellerie. Celui qui tombe dans le coma est décrété sorcier. On le voit partout, il hante tout le monde. Simplement, c'est la fuite en avant. D'avoir fui cette réalité-là leur a permis de ne pas comprendre ce qui se produisait.

Etes-vous conscient d'avoir été influencé par un auteur en particulier ou par un mouvement quelconque tel le surréalisme ou le nouveau roman, par exemple?

C'est difficile de dire. Oui et non.... Malheureusement j'ai beaucoup de retard dans la lecture de mes contemporains.

Vous savez, en général, même sans une rencontre directe, quand les choses sont dans l'air du temps, elles vous tombent dessus. Quand j'ai publié Les cancrelats, il y a eu une amie qui m'a dit: "Ecoute, en te lisant je pensais à Cent ans de solitude." Alors je me suis précipité pour lire Cent ans de solitude. Moi, je trouve que c'est très loin mais il y a des gens qui trouvent une parenté. Or, j'ai écris le livre de 1954 à 1958. Il n'y avait pas de littérature sud-américaine à cette époque-là.

Il est vrai que les critiques tiennent à repérer des influences....

Ça ne tient pas debout. Ce qui est peut-être vrai c'est que, à une période donnée, il y des courants de pensée qui traversent les êtres, ce qui fait qu'il y a des rencontres.

Par exemple, le mot "cadastre," je le découvre à partir de Césaire. Mais alors, j'en ai fait beaucoup

de choses. J'ai écouté en '48 ou '49, L'annonce faite à Maire de Claudel. Alors que je n'aime pas Claudel du tout, je m'en souviens toujours de la personne de Violaine. Je suis certain que chaque fois qu'il y a le mot "lépreux" chez moi, ça vient de cette écoute de cette pièce. Parce que quand j'ai voulu la lire, alors là, je n'ai pas pu la lire du tout. La langue paraissait tout à fait irritante. Est-ce que je peux dire que Claudel m'a influencé? Non. Un personnage, un air, des fois c'est un comédien, peut-être la prestation des comédiens, une représentation.

J'ai lu Garcia Lorcas. J'aime beaucoup la musique flamenco. Cette musique-là me fait bouillir le sang. Sans doute que j'ai emprunté, que je dois quelque chose à Lorcas et au flamenco. Tout ce que je traverse et tout ce qui me traverse sans doute laisse un dépôt en moi. Peut-être même les vers les plus plats qui me sont passés sous les yeux, que j'ai lus à un moment donné, à mon insu, aient déposé quelque chose.

Pouvez-vous dire que vous devez quelque chose aux nouveaux romanciers? A Nathalie Sarraute, par exemple? Ou à Claude Simon?

Je ne les ai jamais lus. Je ne sais pas pourquoi. Je n'ai jamais eu cette curiosité. Comme je n'ai jamais lu les poètes de l'école Tel Quel.

Et aux surréalistes?

Je pourrais même dire que je ne les ai pas lus non plus. Je n'ai pas lu Breton. J'ai essayé de lire Nadja. Je me suis dit, l'expression surréaliste la plus totale c'est précisément l'expression orale.

Tenez, je lisais l'autre jour un poème traduit de langue centrafricaine. Il n'y a rien de plus surréaliste que cela précisément. Alors je pense que là encore, sans doute que l'Occident s'est attribué une invention qu'il n'a pas faite.

Est-ce que vous vous considérez un écrivain engagé?

Oui, mais remarquez le terme "engagement" a plusieurs connotations. C'est le militant politique et cetera. Selon cette connotation-là, non, je ne suis pas un écrivain engagé. Mais j'ai un engagement parce que j'ai un projet littéraire. Ce projet littéraire, pour moi, a un objet.

Il y a un critique qui va publier un livre bientôt sur les trois romans. Il parle d'une "autopsie d'un monde." Oui, j'ai voulu faire cette autopsie-là. Donc cela aussi est un engagement. Mon engagement est plus humain que politique. Il est plus scriptural que politique.

Vous ne partagez pas l'opinion de Fanon, qui disait que la littérature doit être une arme de combat?

Il y en a qui peuvent l'utiliser comme arme. C'est une question de tempérament. Moi, je pense qu'une oeuvre littéraire opère avec une extrême lenteur. Sans doute que ce que j'ai écris ne touche pas mes contemporains mais il touchera peut-être mieux les générations de leurs fils. Quand j'ai publié mon premier livre de poèmes, Le mauvais sang, c'était en 300 exemplaires. Est-ce que vraiment je pouvais penser qu'avec ce titre-là j'allais changer mes compatriotes? Pourtant le titre le disait très bien: "le mauvais sang." Il y de quoi se faire du mauvais sang, compte tenu de ces lésions profondes en nous.

Pourquoi avez-vous choisi d'écrire en français, ce qui n'est pas votre langue maternelle?

Je n'a pas eu à choisir ou d'écrire en français ou ne pas écrire en français. Je crois que le choix, si j'avais eu le choix, c'est d'écrire en français ou ne pas écrire du tout. Et puisque je ne maîtrise pas une autre langue aussi bien, ou peut-être aussi mal, que le français, je n'ai pas fait de choix. L'autre alternatif manque, pour des raisons purement historiques que moi, je ne peux pas refaire. Je ne peux pas refaire l'histoire. Ceux qui veulent ressusciter le passé, en général passent à côté du passé.

Donc vous n'avez jamais appris à écrire dans votre langue maternelle?

Jusqu'à présent, elles ne sont jamais enseignées. Mêmes les générations futures se trouveront dans la situation où je me trouvais moi, il y a cinquante ans. Les langues, le vili, ma langue maternelle, n'est enseignée nulle part. Même en petite école. Et actuellement naissent à Brazzaville, à Pointe-Noire, à Loango, des enfants qui ne parlent que le français, qui baragouinent le français dès le départ.

Des fois les puristes parlent de "crimes" commis contre la langue française par des auteurs africains. Ce serait un moyen de refuser le français neutre, propre, sobre qu'on a appris à l'école. Une sorte d'affirmation d'identité.

Je ne sais pas. En général, quand j'écris, je pense que j'écris correctement en français. Si les Français trouvent que c'est incorrect, ça c'est leur problème. Mais en l'occurrence, peut-être le fait que j'écrive une langue orale, une littérature orale, peut dénaturer les procédés d'écriture littéraires traditionnels. Mais, je vous l'ai dit tout à l'heure, je ne peux pas faire autrement. Je ne puis écrire sans essayer de vocaliser ce que j'écris. Donc, ce

faisant, bien sûr que je change la nature de la langue.

Le français est une langue de laboratoire. Elle a été fabriquée par les Académiciens. Ce n'est pas une langue spontanée. L'Académie Française est là pour y rogner les ailes. Pour entrer dans la langue, un mot passe par des cribles, par ces puristes sans doute, qui neutralisent toute la possibilité émotive d'une langue. Ça c'est leur problème. Dans la mesure où moi, je ne leur ai pas demandé de me coloniser et qu'ils m'ont contraint à parler cette langue, je fais ce que je veux. Si ça ne leur plaît pas, tant pis. Si ça leur plaît, tant mieux. Ce n'est pas mon problème

Et puis de toute façon, moi, je n'ai jamais été puriste. Ce qui me préoccupe le plus c'est moins l'esthétique que l'éthique. Les problèmes de style ne m'intéressent qu'au second plan. Ce qui m'intéresse d'abord, c'est nettement d'essayer de me donner une éthique. Plus tard, cette éthique elle me donnera peut-être un style. Peut-être que, si j'apportais un peu plus de soin à l'esthétique, je serais un épigone d'école de stylistique.

Il n'y a pas chez moi une volonté délibérée de profanation. S'il y a une profanation, c'est parce que j'ai des insuffisances. Peut-être certaines de ces insuffisances font que les choses avancent! Cependant, il y a des gens qui professent qu'ils veulent violenter la langue française. Personnellement, je crois que ce n'est pas par une volonté de violation, c'est par une incapacité de faire mieux!

Qu'est-ce que vous écrivez en ce moment? Est-ce que vous écrivez toujours de la poésie ou consacrez-vous maintenant au roman?

J'écris de temps en temps un poème que je publierai peut-être dans un an ou deux. Mais comme il me semble que j'ai pris du retard sur le plan romanesque.... J'ai un nouveau roman qui va bientôt paraître. Il s'appelle Ces fruits si doux de l'arbre à pain.

Est-ce qu'il commence une nouvelle trilogie?
Je ne sais pas.

Propos recueillis par Betty O'Grady

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