

Writing a Dynamic Identity: Self-Criticism in the Work of Tchicaya U Tam'Si

Chaibou Elhadji Oumarou
University of Wisconsin at Madison

Je suis en rupture avec la tribu, je suis en
rupture avec l'ethnie, je suis en rupture avec
l'Afrique. 'I broke with the tribe, I broke
with ethnicity, I broke with Africa.'

—Tchicaya¹

Thus spoke Tchicaya U Tam'Si in an interview with Tahar Bekri (1988). Very few Africans have had the courage to express their outrage at the stifling African traditions with the vigor and consistency of U Tam'Si. The break with the tribe, the ethnic group, and Africa is an expression of his anger and frustration at himself as reflected in the practices of his society.

In fact, self-criticism is a major theme in Tchicaya's work as he strives to build a dynamic identity through a dynamic writing style. A dynamic identity changes with time and it is directed toward the future as opposed to static identity, which is concerned with only the past. The former is an attempt to live the present, an opening up of self to reality and the necessities of life. The latter is an attempt to escape reality in order to swim in the stagnant waters of an idyllic past.

U Tam'Si's attempt to face up to the present, to confront it in order to change it, permeates all his work as he tries to teach and educate his readers about the danger of a return to a mythic past:

Car en réalité il faut savoir rompre avec le passé lorsque celui-ci
croupit dans les eaux stagnantes de la turpitude. Les nations, les
peuples meurent de leur identité figée. Ce qui est vie est nécessaire
dans le changement. Je veux être une civilisation et non un vestige.

For in reality one must know how to break with the past when it grows foul in the stagnant waters of turpitude. Nations and people die of their set identity. What is life is necessary in change. I want to be a civilization, not a vestige of the past. (Bekri 57)

This essay is an attempt to problematize Tchicaya's efforts to create a dynamic identity for himself, his country and Africa. The focus on self-criticism is meant to further explore the rationale behind his attempted break away from the stifling African traditions. It seeks to know whether or not U Tam'si is hiding behind self-criticism to please a particular audience or whether he is expressing legitimate concerns about Africa.

In order to understand his position better and find appropriate answers to these questions, it is imperative to place him and his work in historical context. Born before the independences of Africa, he grew to witness and experience colonization and the struggle for independence in his native Congo. As a matter of fact, he worked closely with Patrice Lumumba to gain political independence for the country. Thus, his personality as a writer must have grown out of those difficult moments in the history of the continent, and one should expect his work to reflect his personal take of the events.

In addition to the political events, Tchicaya could not ignore the literary activities of his contemporaries. He had to communicate with them in one way or the other since each writer is the product of his or her epoch. In this respect, Négritude was one important literary event he could not circumvent. Founded in Paris in the thirties by Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire and Léon G. Damas, it was then their attempt to create an image for and about Africa with which they could identify with a sense of pride.

An exact definition of Négritude is difficult to find, partly because the founders' distinct personalities influenced their respective philosophies and works. But Senghor soon became the spokesperson for the movement, and he has been credited for giving it a wider application. In *Ce que je crois* (1988), Senghor defines it as "l'ensemble des valeurs de la civilisation noire" 'the sum total of the values of black civilization' (136). But as translator Melvin Dixon claims in the introduction to his *The Collected Poetry By Léopold Sédar Senghor* (1991), the latter's search for the essence of Blackness has led discussions of the movement "to come dangerously close to validating racial stereotypes . . ." (xxix).

Of particular relevance to this essay is Dixon's remark that "the most powerful African elements in Senghor's poetry are in fact images from the past rather than verbal constructions of a present reality: the past in its lush, abundant, luxuriant, erotic diction . . ." (xxx). The poem, "Night of Sine," is a case in point. In it the poet tries to remember his past, but by so doing he also constructs and expands what he sees as an African identity. Listen to him:

Woman, place your soothing hands upon my brow,
Your hands softer than fur.
Above us balance the palm trees, barely rustling
In the night breeze. Not even a lullaby.
Let the rhythmic silence cradle us.
Listen to its song. Hear the beat of our dark blood,
Hear the deep pulse of Africa in the mist of lost villages.
Now sets the weary moon its slack seabed
Now the bursts of laughter quiet down, and even the storyteller
Nods his head like a child on his mother's back
The dancer's feet grow heavy, and heavy, too,
Come the alternating voices of singers.

Now the stars appear and the Night dreams,
Leaning on that hill of clouds, dressed in its long, milky pagne.
The roofs of the hut shine tenderly. What are they saying
So secretly to the stars? Inside, the fire dies out
In the closeness of sour and sweet smells.

Woman, light the clear-oil lamp. Let the Ancestors
Speak around us as parents do when the children are in bed.
Let us listen to the voices of the Elissa Elders. Exiled like us
They did not want to die, or lose the flow of their semen in the
sands.
Let me hear, a gleam of friendly souls visits the smoke-filled hut,
My head upon your breast as warm as tasty *dang* steaming from the
fire,
Let me breathe the odor of our Dead, let me gather
And speak with their living voices, let me learn to live
Before plunging deeper than the diver
Into the great depths of sleep. (Dixon: 6-7)

Rather than be concerned with such a past, U Tam'si opts for the creation of a new dynamic identity that focuses on the present. His break with Africa is not a total rejection of his roots or an absolute refusal to keep usable elements of the past. On the contrary, it is an attempt to build a cultural identity from within, that is, an identity geared toward the future. Such an identity has to be informed not by literary patterns imposed from without, but by pages of African history. Seen from that perspective, his break with ethnîe can be interpreted as an effort to break free from the chains of ethnicity in order to reach out to and accommodate the other.

As a matter of fact, Africa is now coming to grips with post-cold war problems such as famine and civil unrests that contrast with the peace in "Night of Sine" and further complicate divisions along ethnic lines. In this respect, Tchicaya's verbal construction of reality carries some dose of nationalist concerns and his self-criticism is just the other side of his dream of fraternity.

It is unfortunate that he has received so little attention from critics of African literatures. Whether their relative silence is the result of his position vis-à-vis the stifling African traditions and Négritude or of the difficulty in penetrating his work is uncertain. But there is no doubt that he is one of the most modern African writers, as George Lang (1985) has already noted, and one of the greatest as well.

Among the critics who have studied him, most see him as unruly and rebellious. In the novel *Les Cancrelats*, a voice expresses doubts about the past of Loango, a metaphor of Congo and Africa. Says the voice:

Ce passé de Loango est peut-être une légende. Une légende perdue au fond d'un précipice mauve et sombre. Ne vous approchez pas, ne vous penchez pas sur cet abîme, les argiles pétrifiées au fond, parmi les broussailles, ont la couleur de blessures purulentes. . . .

This past of Loango is perhaps a legend. A legend lost at the bottom of a mauve and gloomy precipice. Do not go near it, do not lean on that abyss, the petrified mud at the bottom, among the bushes, has the color of purulent sores. (115)

Against this background of a gloomy and dirty past, the petrified mud is a sign of decay that indicates that the past in question is about to die. What is more, instead of a stone or concrete wall as found in

many brilliant dead civilizations, Loango's past has mud in the bush. This ugly picture contrasts sharply with glorious pasts that one can be proud of. The association of that ugliness with the African past shows U Tam'Si's intention to denounce exaggerated embellishments of the African past.

It is an attempt to say that Africa also has its dark side which has almost gone unnoticed by the Négritude romantics. In *Le ventre*, a collection of poems, he makes it clear that his focus is the ugly facet of himself: "Je dialogue avec ce qui est pollué en moi" 'I hold a dialogue with the defiled part of me' (33).

As pointed out earlier, it will be a mistake to consider this dialogue as a denial of self in order to please a particular audience. In an Africa facing all sorts of social problems, the pollution Tchicaya talks about is likely to refer to the collapse of religious and ethical values. Ill-digested western values coupled with ignorance and poverty have indeed led to corruption and lack of morality. Thus by choosing to address with the ugly facets of modern Africa, U Tam'si magnifies the issue so that it can receive the attention it deserves.

In other words, he is just saying that he is not perfect, nor does he expect anyone else to be. In his collection of short stories, *La main sèche*, he criticizes those writers who embellish their past to make it look more glorious and perfect. There is no such past in the history of civilization as far as the present author is concerned. For Tchicaya, there is nothing to be ashamed of as long as one faces the truth and uses it as a basis for positive and constructive action.

In this respect, running away from one's culture to embrace a foreign one is not the solution to the problem. Tchicaya laughs at the so-called "évolué(e)s," who, as the result of their contact with Western civilization, have lost confidence in their own. To them he has this advice: "Je tus mon dégoût. Je me dis qu'il y a lâcheté à fuir le monde tel qu'il se révèle" 'I silenced my disgust. I tell myself that there is cowardice in running away from the world as it is' (*Main* 164).

Tchicaya wants everyone to face their world as it is, to look at themselves critically in order to see their reality. His self-criticism has cost him his credibility in the eyes of many people in Africa. Yet as Emil Magel (1980) claims, Tchicaya is critical of both Europeans and Africans. His criticism of them, in the process of the search for the truth, has been seen as unfaithful, treacherous, and disloyal. Despite his awareness of the criticism, U Tam'Si persists against what Magel calls the normative rules of the game. They consist of the unspoken prohi-

bition against providing ammunition to racist enemies by exposing the ugliness of Africa.

But for Tchicaya, the search for the truth is more important than whatever the searcher happens to find. Thus in *Les Cancrelats*, Damien, whose daughter is murdered, goes to search for the killer. In the process, he makes important discoveries about himself and the conditions of his life. The authorial voice comments:

La révolte, née de cette recherche, l'aurait conduit à l'avant vers un acte. Qu'importe quel acte? Chaque acte étant l'affirmation d'une liberté!

The revolt, born of this search, would lead him forward toward an act. Does it matter what kind of act? Each act being the affirmation of a liberty! (172)

The search is therefore essential in U Tam'Si's philosophy and it should be considered as such. To his counterparts who undertook the search for their identity in a remote past, he warns that the search ought to be exhaustive as well as objective:

C'est une chose d'aller à la source, une autre de voir venir l'eau à vous. Dans le dernier cas, c'est que ça déborde de quelque part. Savoir ce que c'est ce quelque part est important, si vous tenez à la vie; sinon il vous reste votre soif ou pire. . . .

It is one thing to go back to the sources, another thing to see water coming up to you. In the last case, it is because it overflows from somewhere. To know that somewhere is important, if you hold to life; if not, there remains your thirst or worse. (*Cancrelats* 182)

There is no doubt that the water is a metaphor for the identity the writers in question are looking for. The quotation is almost a direct attack on those writers of whom Prosper, a character in *Les Cancrelats*, is a representative. Under "Le Cauchemar" 'Nightmare,' Tchicaya, in describing Prosper, says that he:

vivait dans un perpétuel compromis, à ce qu'il disait. Une formule creuse à laquelle il voulut donner un sens. Tout son malaise était que ce compromis devenait irremédiable. Et qu'il fallait s'en faire

une raison. Mais ce qui le chiffonnait de plus, c'était qu'il ne savait de quoi était fait ce compromis. Il était revenu au pays. . . .

lived in a perpetual compromise, as he said. A hollow formula to which he wanted to give meaning. And it had to be a good reason for him. But what annoyed him most was the fact that he did not know what the compromise was about. He came back to his country. . . . (*Cancrelats* 182)

Prosper epitomizes the dilemma of African writers in general. The above accusation points to the external influences on African literature through some literary patterns on which it has been modelled. The perception of a negative influence of Europe on Africa is not new, however. Various critics (Ingeborg Kohn 1980; Mike de Llew 1973, 1979) have discussed the influence of European anthropologists on African writers at the beginning of the 20th century.

The essence of their criticism has been summarized by Cheikh Anta Diop and Paulin Hountondji, as quoted by Eileen Julien (1992). In her critique of Négritude, Julien points out the rampant racism in the movement whose "terms of definition . . . are . . . precisely those of Gobinau [a French racist], with this difference that they are now seen as positive and essential to world humanism" (19).

Senghor's idyllic past has indeed a lot to do with the influence of the early European anthropologists and other scientists. The negative consequences of the scientific revolution on European societies had given birth to a love for nature known as Romanticism. Under this movement, the "savages" of Africa and elsewhere were considered as living in paradise. The notion of the "Noble Savage" became popular and more anthropologists became interested in Africa. Leo Frobenius was influential on the work of Senghor, who readily acknowledges his debt to him.

Yambo Ouologuem's *Devoir de violence* [*Bound to Violence*] is one of the African responses to the influence of anthropologists who, it should be noted, were not all bad. Hountondji is also noteworthy for his sharp criticism of those early anthropologists and African writers whom he accuses of complicity in many respects. According to Julien, he:

refers to the complicity in the 1930s and 40s between Third World nationalists and 'progressive' Western anthropologists. For years

they will assist each other, the former using the latter in support of their pluralistic theses. (20)

Tchicaya is therefore not the only one to have criticized the external influences on the African writers and the African identity they have attempted to construct on foreign literary models. He refers to Négritude as a “formule creuse” ‘hollow formula’ to which Prosper has attempted to give meaning. He also defends himself against the accusation that he destroys Africa by exposing its ugliness to the world. A voice that may be considered as his says to Ndundu:

Ndundu, je suis . . . je n’oublie pas, je suis tien, mais! Tu es mien et je te dis encore: mais! Comprends ce que tu voudras, regarde-toi, regarde-moi. Je me regarde, je te regarde. *Le ciel ne nous voit pas autrement que tu te vois, autrement que je me vois. Là est la vérité. Hausser les épaules, c’est se tourner le dos et se dire innocent! Quelle innocence est la mienne? Je m’accuse, oui! Je m’accuse!*

Ndundu, I am . . . I do not forget, I am yours, but . . . ! You are mine and I say again: But . . . ! Understand what you want, look at yourself, look at me. I look at myself, I look at you. *The heavens do not see us differently from how you see yourself, differently from how I see myself. In that lies the truth. Shrugging one’s shoulders, that is turning one’s back and proclaiming oneself innocent! What innocence is mine? I accuse myself, yes! I accuse myself! (Cancrelats 35, emphasis mine)*

This self-accusation is certainly a balance to the exaggeration of the African romantics whose idylls have not cured the ills of their societies. B. M. Ibitokun (1981) has defended Tchicaya on the ground that his “mauvais sang” ‘bad blood’ has nothing to do with congenital inferiority. At best, it is his historical situation that can best explain it. Unhappy about that condition, the poet “covers himself up with a mask of humor in order not to give up way to despair and nihilism” (34).

U Tam’Si calls upon his people to live in the present and to be more responsible. He makes this point most clearly and eloquently in his interview with Tahar Bekri, expressing his outrage at:

Cet angélisme qui veut que nous n'ayons aucune part de responsabilité dans toutes les catastrophes qui sont cause de tant d'indigences. Bouter le feu à tout cela.

that sainthood which wants us to have no share of responsibility in all the catastrophes which are the cause of so much indigence. Set fire to all this. (58)

The call to set fire to the stifling African traditions is reminiscent of his other collection of poems, *Feu de brousse* (*Bush Fire*). Used to clear farms seasonally in Africa, the bush fire is, as Tchicaya says, an exorcism meant to destroy anything that could hinder the sowing of good seeds. In other words, the collection is meant to be an action of weeding and seeding, an act of the construction of a better future.

To reach that goal, he calls upon people to be more active, more involved, in taking constructive initiatives if they want to get out of the desperate conditions in which they languish. He urges them all, especially the youth, not to simply follow the steps of their parents:

Parce que c'était ce qui était désormais permis: qu'un fils pouvait marcher devant son père et *non suivre son père* . . . Mais ceux-là qui disent, qui s'indignent qu'un fils . . . qu'ils s'indignent après tout! . . . Qu'un fils pouvait précéder son père sur un chemin périlleux.

Because that was what was allowed from that time onwards: that a sibling could walk in front of his father and *not follow his father* . . . But those who say, who are indignant with the sibling . . . let them be indignant after all! . . . That a sibling could precede his father on a perilous road. (*Cancrelats* 35, emphasis mine)

The dangerous road is the one that leads to innovative and positive thinking and action. And because there is no easy way to freedom, he wants to shake the people, especially the youth, out of their resignation and docile obedience. As mentioned earlier, any act is, in the view of U Tam'Si, an affirmation of liberty. On the contrary, silence is an acceptance of oppression and an exercise of cowardice.

As Katheryn Wright (1991) suggests in her article on satire and censorship in *Le destin*, central to the climate of his work is the theme of the death of life, a wounding of the spirits that have led to

resignation. Because of his repulsion at the general state of things, he dedicated *Le destin glorieux du Maréchal Nnikon Nniku, prince qu'on sort*:

à la jeunesse Congolaise avec l'espoir de la voir partager avec moi la sainte horreur que j'ai des petits caporaux faiseurs de coups d'états.

The Glorious Destiny of Marshal Nnikon Nniku, Prince to be deposed to the Congolese youth with the hope to see it share with me the holy horror that I have for the small corporals makers of coup d'états. (Bekri 58)

This is a sad commentary on modern Africa, where military regimes still preside over the destiny of many nations. The play is in fact a dramatization of the various problems facing the continent. It magnifies and criticizes neo-colonialism, which still operates through political, economic and cultural channels. Very satiric, the play exposes the corrupt African regimes, which are more eager to serve foreign interests rather than those of their own countries. Finally, the satiric laugh it causes is meant to move Africans out of their, passive acceptance of exploitative regimes.

To this effect, Tchicaya is determined to get everybody out of the "mauvais sommeil" 'bad sleep' and to break with the chain of the "solidarité tacite, dans le pire" 'tacit solidarity, at its worst.' He takes recourse to the techniques outlined above in order to sensitize the people and lead them to revolt against the yoke of the living death. No wonder that he employs several aesthetic devices to transform ugliness into awareness, silence into voices, and passivity into action. The scatological device is used not because he likes the filth in Africa, but because it is too repulsive to live with:

Il arrive qu'on se bouche le nez. . . . L'air a mauvaise haleine. Des carries qui troublent les bouches! (44) . . . Les gens ne savent plus vivre, . . . on aimerait que certaines bouches n'aient jamais raison! Tout dépend de la place que l'on fait dans la vie.

It happens that one closes the nose. . . . The air has bad breath. Tooth-decay which troubles mouths! (44) . . . People do not know how to live anymore, . . . one would like that certain mouths never

be right! It all depends on the place one makes in life. (*Cancrelats* 50)

While tooth-decay suggests a state of mental and physical corruption, the polluted air shows how the corruption penetrates all aspects of life, political and cultural in particular. It is therefore a general contamination that invites a serious and urgent treatment that U Tam'si is trying to offer through his work. To that end, his satiric pen is like a magnifying glass which helps everyone who can read to see the social ills they are living with.

Wright has contended that Tchicaya has the ability to transform political oppression into a successful surrealist vision by supporting its meaning with satire and its attendant ironies. She defines irony as a "type of literary censure" which is used to criticize and correct a given situation. To do so, the satirist has to strike a difficult balance between aesthetic features and those of attack. Although most of her observation is based on *Destin*, much of it can be applied to his entire work.

In this respect, irony, humor, and satire are the most important tools of his sharp criticism. *Les Cancrelats* (*The Roaches*) is an ironic title whose meaning unfolds as one reads the novel. It is the story of cockroaches (Africans) taking their case to the tribunal of a hen (France). Set against the background of colonialism and neo-colonialism, the novel is a satiric laugh at those naive Africans who believe that they can get a fair trial at the tribunal of a judge who happens to have interest in the case they defend.

Apart from the self-criticism, this novel contains some of U Tam'Si's most acerbic attacks on colonialism. Casting the latter in the same mold with Christianity, Tchicaya has condemned the wrongs done to Africans in the name of Christ. Using a mixed couple (African woman and White male) as an example, he describes their love-making as a metaphor for the rape of Africa by Europe. It has also been a plunder of the former by the latter. Thus after they finish their intercourse, an authorial voice comments that "Jean a pillé Sophie . . . Saint Jean a pillé Sainte Sophie . . ." "John has looted Sophie . . . Saint John has looted Saint Sophie . . ." (*Cancrelats* 97) Is it not ironic that Saint Jean loots Saint Sophie in the name of Christ?

But as Jacques Chevrier (1988) argues, despite Tchicaya's apparent bitter attacks on Christianity, he is not against the Christian religion as such. He is against the false Christians preaching a false Christianity supported by mercantilistic interests. Chevrier reports that the Bible

was Tchicaya's bedside book, and the title, *La main sèche* (*Dried Hand*), borrowed from St. Matthew's gospel, supports his claim.

U Tam'Si is a realistic writer whose critique of Négritude and Africa is not as negative as many would like to think. The writer is very concerned about the future of his continent with regard to the present. He worries about his culture as it faces the invading French culture and civilization. Yet he criticizes those who think that the stifling African traditions and other symbols of oppression should continue to be worshipped.

His courageous move away from the mythic past and Négritude, which, according to Chevrier, are synonymous with obscurantism and immobilism, is also seen as his willingness to accept a compromise whose reality is dictated by the history of Congo, which many critics associate with the Congo River as well. Godard quotes U Tam'Si as saying that "Le Congo c'était la quête politique de mon père, c'est la mienne" 'Congo was the political quest of my father, it is mine' (Godard 135).

The history of Congo is the history of all colonized African countries. It is the history of the encounter between the Christian God and the local divinities of Africa. The result of the encounter is the fusion of two different and often conflicting world views. As a result, a new barbarian has been born out of that encounter, a barbarian defined by Tchicaya in the foreword (*Avant-propos*) to *La main sèche* (*Dried Hand*). His argument is that every civilization is:

une rencontre syncrétique de deux mondes, au moins, barbares l'un pour l'autre, barbare l'un et l'autre. Et cela produit de toute évidence *un nouveau barbare* si controversé lui-même que c'est forcément un être tragique, fatal, parce qu'habité par deux morts, celle de deux mondes qui l'ont enfanté. Ici, le monde païen et le monde Chrétien.

a syncretic encounter of two worlds, at least, barbarians to each other, barbarians both. And that produces obviously *a new barbarian* so controversial that he is by force tragic and fatal as a carrier of two deaths, that of the two worlds which gave birth to him. In this case, the Pagan and Christian. (*Main* 8, emphasis mine)

This argument is reminiscent of Samba Diallo's tragic character in *L'aventure ambiguë* (*Ambiguous Adventure*) by Cheikh Hamidou

Kane. The new barbarian and Diallo share the same tragic destiny of living in a world where different value systems come together, sometimes with conflicts. They consist of Christianity and Paganism in the case of the new barbarian, Western values in addition to Christianity and Islam in the case of Samba Diallo.

The death of Samba Diallo after the fatal blow dealt by the fool leaves open the question of whether or not his death means opting for a choice, that of dying in the name of Islam in order to avoid the paradox of a tragic destiny. In fact, the voice of the Light which talks to Diallo in his grave may be interpreted as a sign of welcome to him.

In the case of the new barbarian, he is said to be the child of two dead worlds: African and European. So despite his being fatal and tragic, the new barbarian seems to be the phoenix born out of the ashes of his parents. A syncretic synthesis seems to have been achieved, unlike in the case of Samba Diallo. In the foreword to *La main sèche*, U Tam'Si says that the collection is "Le portrait à facettes d'un être qui se cherche une identité de synthèse" 'The portrait of a multi-faceted man looking for a syncretic identity' (8).

This may be interpreted as part of U Tam'Si's struggle to live a significantly productive life, an attitude well summarized by Kathryn Wright when she says that for Tchicaya, "Fate itself may not be controllable, but to yield to a contrived destiny is to accept the prison of oppression" (93). He has proven that philosophy through his personal writing style, which invites readers to adopt a self-questioning or critical attitude. Not content with his identity, he looks for a dynamic model that would help him free himself both from the vestiges of colonialism and from the stifling African traditions. The only true identity is created through (self-) questioning, Thicaya U Tam'si answers in his work. Without sure and dynamic identity, there is no sure stance from which one can look at oneself with the smile of a free person.

Note

1. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

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