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OCEANIC AND RIVER IMAGERY IN TWO FRANCOPHONE  
POETS: TCHICAYA U TAM'SI AND J. B. TATI-LOUTARD

The dominance of water imagery in modern African poetry must come as a surprise to many foreign readers, who may bring to this poetry expectations revolving around jungles and wild animals. But in this paper I want to get beyond the relatively obvious observation that water plays a role of central importance in the poetry of such writers as Gabriel Okara, J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah and Kofi Awoonor. Instead I want to look as precisely as possible at its rather different place in the work of the two major Congolese poets of today. For Congo-Brazzaville which, unlike most of Africa, really does have jungles, has also a seaboard washed by the Atlantic Ocean.

Although Kofi Awoonor, for instance, was born 'with the sea in his ears', and Christopher Okigbo was reared close by the great Niger, both are poets of the water-margin. The imaginative centre of their poetry is on the shore, gazing seaward. And from the sea or the river come those visions of wholeness or fulfilment which give meaning to their lives. The shore-line is a 'limit'; one dwells upon it, or returns to it, because it marks the point of transition from potentiality to realisation. I want to suggest that this is true neither of U Tam'si nor of Tati-Loutard. In the poetry of the former, the reader is as often cast upon or within the water as set upon its margin. He participates in its life, in its processes, as fish or canoe, as corpse or pebble. He is rounded, reduced, changed and reborn within the veins of the sea. The process is more like that so marvellously evoked by Shakespeare in *The Tempest*:

Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.

The difference doesn't seem to be so much one of culture (both J.P. Clark and Kofi Awoonor spring, after all, from sea-fishing communities), but one of imagination. Let me begin with an example from Tchicaya's *Épitome* (1962) to try to illustrate this difference:

L'été promis commence! A moi vos fols amers,  
 mer en gésine! O plainte; il est temps de renâitre!  
 Cachez-vous aussi, Mer, l'arbre absent de ma vie?  
 Mon visage est de proue j'affronte a jeun l'orage  
 sur la mer chaque éclair me sustente et m'enivre  
 si le corps est l'esquif, l'âme est ce coelacanthé  
 que seul je vais pêcher dans l'ancien ténébre  
 le prendre frétilant de me voir plus vivant  
 ramifié ou forêt pour l'ombre de mes frères  
 ou certaine essence de Limba ou de teck  
 pour la manne de mes mânes; goémon sel phosphore  
 sur ce lit de sable ils eussent pris leur manne.

Perhaps the key line here is 'le prendre frétilant de me voir plus vivant', which concentrates a part of that process of continual transformation that runs right through the poem; indeed, right through the work of U Tam'si. It is impossible to *locate* him in the texture of the poem - he is everywhere. Without wishing to make him sound like a contortionist, one could say that he keeps one foot firmly planted in his familiar forest whilst plunging himself into the sea. And, once there, he glides effortlessly from the boat whose prow is his thrusting face, to the line which gropes far down in 'l'ancien ténébre', to the wriggling fish which gives back to him a sense of himself 'plus vivant'. And this sense of enhanced life is instantly expressed in a return to forest imagery; it sets the poet branching and ranging into a forest shade to embrace his brothers. Finally, the 'manna' image sets up a reverse movement, from the forest manna ('essence de Limba') upon which the spirits pasture ('manes' being a further complication of 'ombre', as well as a pun upon 'manne') to the windswept beach of sea-wrack, sea-salt and phosphorus where the poem began.

U Tam'si, to sum up the quality I am trying to identify here, never *observes* his world; he flows into it and through it. His poetry is like a penetrating, ever-moving cloud which ranges through all forms, objects, shapes of life. And this play of forms continues in his poetry even when the poet himself appears (though this is illusory) to have withdrawn momentarily into watchfulness. A passage from an earlier poem, 'A

Travers Temps et Fleuve' in *Feu de Brousse* (1957), will show what I mean:

nous avons vu le sable  
 nous avons vu l'écueil  
 qui l'ignore  
 nous avons les fleuves et les arbres  
 qui le dira  
     nous avons cru  
     nous avons cru  
     qui le niera

nous avons pris des carpes plein nos filets  
 il suffisait d'un coup de pouce  
 le monde etait sauvé par le silence  
 mais voici  
 la mer saute l'écueil  
 mais voici  
 l'écueil culbute la mer  
 au loin s'en vont les sept fleuves  
 a savoir pour qui chantent les feuilles.

Here the opening lines show an attempt to assemble and relate to each other things experienced and remembered. But in the last stanza quoted everything enters once more into a dynamic, ever-shifting relationship. Every movement holds within itself the secret meaning of another: the flow of the river will discover for whom the leaves sing.

Because of this continual interflow and continual shift of perspective within it, it is not enough to interpret U Tam'si's poetry in terms of a rigid system of equivalences. We have said little if we merely relate the ocean to change, rebirth and inexhaustible creative potentiality; the river to the flow of life and death, which is both Congolese history and individual existence; the forest and its yearning tree to themes of ancestry and origin. It is the way these symbols dance around and inform each other that makes his poetry. That is why it is necessary to read U Tam'si with a breath as long as his own. He entirely eschews the occasional; all his poems are really one long poem, and our reading of each shifts our perception of the preceding one. There is no way of making this point through analysis of short extracts, though this can teach us something about the way U Tam'si effects his transformations. Only a consecutive reading of at least four volumes; *Feu de Brousse* (1957), *A Triche-Coeur* (1960), *Epitome* (1962) and *Le Ventre* (1964) will give the reader an adequate idea of the unusually high degree of consistency within the developing line of his art.

For the same reasons, it is not really possible to isolate and concentrate upon the water imagery as a single factor in his work. For example, in the important long poem 'l'Etrange. Agonie' in *A Triche-Coeur*, the urine of the 'idiot virgin' who once pissed on the poet becomes the urine of three centuries which have pissed on his country's sadness. And this great stream of urine becomes the Congo itself - 'l'eau du fleuve prolix'. But this image of contamination is instantly changed to one of acceptance and rejoicing - 'j'ai joui en avalant toute ma tristesse' - and leads directly into the moment of calm and stillness beside the ocean which stands just before the poem's close. Here it is a refreshing, restoring rain which washes over the poet's body. But let me quote the passage now to show something of this process:

J'ai bien le mal du pays  
-mais de quel pays  
-le congo le congo

l'écho a longuement pissé sur moi  
ahanant  
j'eus envie de faire l'amour  
avec ce fleuve  
l'ayant fait j'ai joui de toute mon âme  
ma voix percutant la brousse en délire  
m'est revenue nombreuse avec trois siècles  
de morts qui ont pissé sur mon mal du pays  
l'eau du fleuve prolix  
et j'ai joui en avalant toute ma tristesse

Me revoici devant la mer  
la mer n'obéit plus qu'aux seuls négriers  
pas un vague ne chante  
le temps et sans douleur  
plus une coccinelle  
nullement la mer ne bouge  
pas une baigneuse  
le sable est net et la mer est proche  
Lje me sens coupable de ne pas tendre la main  
la pluie ruisselle sur mon corps.

At the very close of the poem, however, it is oblivion within the sea that the poet seeks:

Attachez une pierre a ma mort  
que j'ai lourde sur le coeur.

Perhaps I have delivered less than I promised, but I don't believe it is possible to seek with greater precision than this. Water is an agent of transformation in U Tam'si's work; of blessing, cleansing and renewal; but also of contamination and destruction. Furthermore, it is not the only agent of transformation; fire or sunlight is another of equal importance. What is certain is that because of the constant sense of interfusion I have referred to the sea is never a 'limit'. We do not gaze over it for visions, as Okigbo or Awoonor might do, but mingle with it in a continual process of transmutation.

In the work of Tati-Loutard the sea is even more insistently present. Indeed, I believe he is alone among African poets of today in the intensely oceanic character of his writing. If U Tam'si occasionally takes us fishing for the soul, Tati continually takes us fishing for a livelihood. The favourite image of freedom (and the perils of freedom) in his work is the deep-sea fisherman:

Le jour fut bref, déjà l'espace s'en ressent:  
 Les points cardinaux remontent vers le zenith  
 Puis la lune à nouveau les disperse.  
 Sur la mer ou l'on n'entend plus que l'eau regner sur le silence  
 La falaise se penche comme une cruche.  
 La vague aboie et s'élève contre le ciel;  
 Et, de ce blasphème, le pêcheur se sent inquiet.  
 Sur toute piste, il croise la vague et le vent:  
 Au loin le sable du rivage luit plus qu'un soleil.

The grandeur of his imagery is a point in common with his great Congolese contemporary; note the economy with which he fills the whole horizon with the sense of a particular moment of time and weather - 'déjà l'espace s'en ressent'. But it is specifically the grandeur of man battling with the elements for survival, rather than participating in their flux. His fishermen don't leave their slender canoes to indulge in the cosmic explorations of U Tam'si. When they do, involuntarily, leave them, it is to drown. Those at sea strain their eyes towards the land, as in the poem just quoted, 'Le Pêcheur Rentre'. Those on shore strain equally to glimpse the returning sails of any still lost in the desert of the waves, as we see in another movement of 'La Vie des Eaux':

Ou serait le pecheur? Et ou le cavalier marin,  
 Partit hier par les sentes vertes des eaux  
 Entre les defiles des recifs et les accidents du large:  
 Bonds de squales et cabrioles de dauphins?

La pirogue revient seule au trot des vagues vers son écurie de sable:  
Aucune autre tumeur sur le corps bleu-sale de la mer!...

Mais rien que la mer fondant toutes gencives dehors sur les littorines,  
Et la vapeur de sa robe au loin, repassée au fer blanc du soleil!  
Quelle torture impose à nos yeux cette recherche vaine,  
Qui précipite l'ombre sur nos paupières!

If the river predominates over all other images in U Tam'si's poetry, the same dominance might seem to belong here to the sea. But Tati sometimes wearies of its insistent challenge, turns his back upon it and seeks other kinds of freedom, other scales of definition for the littleness of man. And, unlike U Tam'si, he offers some *genre* poems which content themselves with scene-painting. By situating himself more precisely in his poetry, he seems to divide it more clearly into poems 'set' in Europe and those 'set' in Africa; or between those concerned with reminiscence (like 'Amour et Separation' or 'Un Mariage Eprouvant') and those content with description. Thus his poetry is fundamentally more familiar to the European reader than the turbulent stream of U Tam'si's verse, which never lets him put his foot down to rest. Here, for example, are the closing lines of Tati's 'Une Fille-Oranger':

Chaque chose défile déjà si familière,  
Chaque cri, chaque jaillissement de vie:  
L'oiseau qui prend mesure de son poids sur la branche;  
Et la fillette pure aux dents blanches  
Que l'on découvre soudain orange: aux fruits mûrs sur la route.  
Et sa robe bat si fort au vent qu'elle pourrait s'envoler!

But my business here has been with Tati as a poet of water, rather than with the full range of his work. And here it may be useful to note that whereas the prevailing movement in U Tam'si's poetry is always down-river, towards the sea and its renewing tides:

Donc suivant les chemins de ce fleuve à la mer  
fuissonner dans un courant marin ma condour

Tati-Loutard often offers us a contrary movement, turning his back upon the howling waves to show us that the Congo has 'other spaces' and 'other waters' to offer. In *l'Envers du Soleil* there is even a poem whose movement precisely reverses that expressed in the lines quoted above, for this poem is sub-titled 'de la mer au fleuve'. It begins with a

gesture of rejection, for the spume and wind upon the ocean-beach no longer permit the poet to tell one sea-bird from another. There is a sense of peace as, salmon-like, we thrust further and further 'parmi les pistes de la brousse', far beyond the utmost rumour of the waves. I will quote most of the poem, so that the whole range of this movement may be seen:

Sternes, mouettes ou goélands, comment discerner  
 entre corps minces et corps gras  
 entre cris aigus et voix graves  
 Dans cet embrun qui se lève sur les eaux?  
 Et le vent joue sur toutes les cordes des oiseaux!...  
 Mais nous avons d'autres eaux plus douces et plus courantes  
 Ou le sel n'oxyde point le rêve des poissons.  
 Elles voyagent: elles savent ou elles vont!  
 Elles tiennent l'Est et le Sud, flairant la mer parmi les pistes de la brousse:

Et fendant villes et villages à coup de flots  
 Avec leur citadins, leur tribus et leurs clans  
 C'est un monstre de fleuve muni de soies vertes  
 Debout sur son corps tout le long de son cours,  
 Et de cascades d'où perpétuellement  
 Il se verse à lui-même un vin mousseux!  
 Jadis les crues du fleuve furent si fortes  
 Qu'elles envahirent tout le pays de son nom.

The last couplet seems to me a remarkable *tour de force*, which not only gathers up the whole movement of the poem in a single gesture, but turns it to humorous hyperbole. The peculiar strengths of Tati-Loutard can be measured here, as fully as those of U Tam'si in the lines quoted from *Epitome*, 'l'été promis commence'. That comparison will show U Tam'si pre-eminent, perhaps pre-eminent in all Africa at present; but it will also show Congo-Brazzaville fortunate in both its poets.