CHAPTER SIX

CHRISTIAN THEME OF PASSION
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Around me roar and crash the pagan isms
To which most of my life was consecrate,
Betrayed by evil men and torn by schisms
For they were built on nothing more than hate!
I cannot live my life without the faith
Where new sensations like a fawn will leap,
But old enthusiasms like a wraith,
Haunt me awake and haunt me when I sleep...

Ah the flower is blue
Ah! the overalls are also blue
Ah! these blues that I dance
no longer remember what the belly promises:
Three deniers
for the most intense passion
for a passion so intense
Where do we act that?,
Where did we act it?
Where does the church keep its sanctuary?
It's in the antechamber
of the bishop of Kin!....

It is common knowledge that Africa was once regarded as
a dark continent due to its inaccessibility and lack of
development. The Christian Missionaries were among the
first to venture into the unchartered expanses of the
African jungle to spread the light of the Gospel. In
fact, it was especially due to the dedicated and
committed service of Christian Missionaries and the
Christian faith in particular that the Africans have come

to appreciate the significance of life and death and the value of the contact with the outside world.

The Christian Missions of Africa lifted the Blacks to a state of better life conditions. They set up dispensaries and brought medical aid to the afflicted. They taught them the basic hygiene and health care. The Missions also undertook the task of educating the illiterate tribal children. They taught them the alphabet. It was through medical assistance and education the Missionaries reached the mind and heart of the tribe-oriented Blacks and led them to appreciate better conditions of life. In course of time they set up schools for the tribal children and the educational mission which continues even up to this point of time was started on a regular footing. It was through these humanitarian acts of kindness and love that the Missionaries endeared themselves to the natives and thus propagated the Gospel.

The converts among the natives began to bear the message to their fellow country men. They exhorted their country men to receive Christ as their saviour. Phillis Wheatley, for example, says:

Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you;
Impartial Saviour is his title due;
While Christianity thus began to establish itself firmly on the African soil, there came closely on the heels of the Missionaries some European colonists. These colonists began to sow the seed of the slave trade and imperialism.

The slave traders were all invariably White men who also professed to follow the Christian religion. Irrespective of their nationality and religious inclinations they were all considered Christians. Thus Christianity also came to assume the dubious role of a confederate in the slave trade.

Love and Compassion are central to the tenets of Christianity. In fact, the African native heard love and compassion explained in the churches and expounded in the schools. To his bewilderment the Black found that the White adopted dual standard while applying love and compassion in actual life. Cecil Northcott, while discussing the role of Christianity in Africa, makes a pertinent comment saying:

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On the one hand it is the religion with the clearest assertion of the brotherhood of men as set out in the Epistle to the Galatians with its oft trumpeted 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). On the other [sic] it is the religion which so often, and seemingly permanently, denies this claim in practice... 589

The African native was thus disillusioned with the way Christianity was preached and practised by those who sought to spread the message of the Gospel and at the same time, ironically though, symbolized racism. As Kenneth Scott Latourette puts it, "Black Africa's early contacts with professedly Christian peoples were far from happy." 590

The deported slaves in Europe and in America also did not find in Christianity any salve to their already crushed spirit. Rather the scripture was used to seal their subjugation by quoting Saint Paul's admonition: "Slaves, obey your masters!" 591

Thousands of slaves got baptized. But baptism was no guarantee against the ill-treatment of the slave owners.


591 The Living Bible, Ephesians, vi:5.
Christianity as a religion failed to secure their freedom. Latourette observes as follows:

While Christianity did something to ameliorate the lot of the slaves and in time the majority of the transplanted blacks adopted it, the faith long failed to abolish either slavery or the slave trade....

The slaves who turned to Christianity with the hope of getting a better deal met with only disillusionment, denial and debasement. Northcott sums up saying:

...if the African moves into the land of a so-called Christian nation he received another series of shocks about Christianity, and is probably so affronted in his own personal dignity that he is disillusioned for ever about the Christian faith....

Despite the dehumanizing role that Christianity in all practical aspects had come to play in the lives of the slaves, it did offer them a kind of solace in their misery. They forgot their pain and suffering at least momentarily, and began to look beyond this earthly consideration. E. Franklin Frazier observes that

...when the Methodists and Baptists began their proselyting among the slaves and poor

593 Cecil Northcott, Christianity in Africa, p.65.
whites they were outspoken against slavery. When they ceased to oppose slavery openly, they continued to present christianity as an escape for the enslaved blacks from their earthly condition.\footnote{594}

Nirmal Bajaj also reflects the same idea. He says that when Christianity was taught to the Blacks, "it afforded a mental escape from the wretchedness of his social position."\footnote{595}

The Christian religion also offered the Blacks a body of running parallels to their lives. The Bible was replete with incidents and occasions that reflected their own misery and bondage. The Blacks liberally drew from The Bible and sang them as blues. Thus the Christian religion appeared to them as a means of escape. The story of Lazarus and the evil rich man enabled the Blacks to make a common cause with the wretchedness of the poor man thus:

\begin{verbatim}
Poor man Laz'rus, poor as I,  
Don't you see?  
Poor man Laz'rus, poor as I,  
When he died he found a home on high  

Rich man Dives, he lived so well,  
Don't you see?
\end{verbatim}


\footnote{595} Nirmal Bajaj, Search for Identity in Black Poetry, p.9.
Rich man Dives, he lived so well.
When he died he found a home in hell....

The Blacks used biblical allusions and references in their spirituals and blues with racial overtones. The Blacks also used the scriptures to give vent to their frustration as is explicit in the following parody of the Lord's Prayer:

Our Fader, who art in heaven,
White man owe me 'leven, pay me seven,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
And ef I hadn't tuck that, I wouldn't
git none....

Christianity and Christian practices came to reflect for the Blacks their own precarious existence. Marginalized as they are, they considered themselves a persecuted race like the Israelites. So, while they sang about Moses they had their own wretchedness upper most in their mind and bemoaned their helplessness thus:

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egyptland,

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596 Bontemps and Hughes, eds. "I Got a Home in Dat Rock," in The Book of Negro Folklore, Quoted in Jean Wagner's Black Poets of the United States, p.29.

597 Brown's citation, Quoted in Jean Wagner's Black Poets of the United States, p.35.
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go...  

As the Jews waited for a deliverer, Messiah, the Blacks expected deliverance through Christianity. It is ironical that the very same religion which was instrumental in bringing about their captivity should deliver them. Yet, at least a section of the Blacks thought that the doctrine of love and universal brotherhood would one day prevail.

There were others who disagreed to uphold the idea of universal brotherhood with equal conviction. Jean Wagner makes out a case for them and says:

The slave could hardly expect that through men's deeds he would experience liberation here below, whereas the christian religion offered him at least the hope of a happier lot and greater justice in the world beyond. This expectation enabled him to support more readily the burden of each day....  

While Christianity did serve to ameliorate their suffering by enabling them to endure the actualities of

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598 Bontemps and Hughes, eds. "Go Down, Moses," in The Book of Negro Folklore, Quoted in Ibid., p.29.

their physical existence with courage, it gave them the promises of heavenly existence where their sufferings would be richly rewarded. Even those few Blacks who had not embraced Christianity, had something to do with Christian Missions, Christian education, Christian way of life or at least with their fellow Blacks who had become Christians. They were thus influenced by Christianity in diverse ways. And Christianity percolated to the grass-root level affecting their lives, conditioning their behaviour, influencing their values and changing their attitudes and outlook to society in general.

Christianity does not appeal to the unlettered Blacks who are conservative. They are traditional minded and tend to have a blind faith in tribal system and the tribal god. But they are not averse to Christianity because whatever they come to know about Christianity is through the welfare projects of Christianity like the medical service and other social services. Though they are benefited by these good-Samaritan activities of the Christian Church, Christianity as a religion by and large, remains an anathema to the unlettered and tribal-oriented Blacks.

On the other hand, the educated Blacks consider Christianity as a mark of Western Civilization and hence an imposition. Religion being a component of culture, they feel that Christianity is a vestige of the Western
culture. The lettered Blacks relate it to cultural imperialism which is riding astride their colonized consciousness. But unlike the unlettered Blacks, they are able to appreciate the good aspects of Christianity. They are particularly attracted by the teachings of Christ, especially of Christian love and tolerance. However, the Black intellectual identifies his struggles with the persecution undergone by Christ. There is so much in common between their sufferings that he makes common cause with Christ.

Both in the physical indignities suffered by Christ and His mental anguish, the Black finds a perfect paradigm to his own humiliation and agony. He also finds himself in an identical situation as that of Christ, pitted against a murderous pack of hecklers.

As Christ as an individual suffered for the whole of humanity, the Black intellectual takes up the cause of his suffering race and suffers for it. Thus the Black intellectual is attracted towards Christ in His capacity as a human being rather than as a divine-head. Christ's Passion endears Him to the Black who in turn endeavours to wear the crown of thorns and work for racial salvation. Thus a Black man, even without being a Christian, appreciates the good aspects of the religion
and lives the best part of Christianity through his basic Christian attitude and outlook.

Christian passion is firmly anchored in selfless sacrifice. Sacrificing one's own self or laying down one's own life for the sake of others is the supreme sacrifice advocated by Christ.

It is said in the Bible thus:

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends....

The Black intellectual also abdicates his status, fame, fortune and every other material benefit that counts in this world for the sake of his fellow Blacks. It is comparable to the illustration of the Wheat grain mentioned in The Bible as follows:

...Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit....

Such selfless sacrifice is made possible through love which is pure and boundless and that which expects no recompense. Out of the abundance of His love Christ gave

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600 The Holy Bible, St. John, XV:13.

Himself up as a ransom for the humanity. It is said in The Bible "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Love for the lost humanity is the motivating force in Christian passion. Similarly love is also central to the Black's concern for his fellow Blacks.

Service rendered to the point of self-negation and love shown to the wretched and the outcast to the point of self-effacement entail suffering. The one who serves and loves has to endure a good deal of suffering both physical and mental. Christ experienced it on the cross. There can be no crown without suffering. "The paradox that is central to Biblical history is: mastery through service, victory through defeat, joy through sorrow, and life through death," is exemplified in the life of Jesus. Jesus suffered so that humanity may be saved. Through his agony the entire human race has found joy and has been assured of salvation and eternal bliss.

True to the Christian theme of passion, the Black intellectual takes up the cross on himself. He foregoes his comforts, feels one with the miserable fellow Blacks.

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602 The Holy Bible, Romans, V:8.
and suffers for his suffering race. His cup of gall is one of his own choosing even as that of Christ's. Wincing under his affliction, he feels an identification with the sufferings of crucified Christ and yearns for racial salvation.

Similarly, the Black creationists Claude McKay and Tchicaya U Tam'si are so much engrossed with the problems of the Blacks that they make a passionate attempt to identify themselves with their universal suffering. They also bear the stamp of a rich exposure to the Christian concept of passion. Their verse reflects their woeful concern for their forsaken fellow Blacks and captures their angst over their tragic lot.

McKay, in spite of his Jamaican birth and being well off on his father's own farm land, is drawn towards the vortex of Black misery. He shudders, when as a constable in Jamaica, he sees the Blacks being ill-treated. His early encounter with Black malaise develops in him a racial sympathy which is born out of his deep love for his fellow Blacks.

Christ is burdened with the love for the lost humanity and His sufferings which culminate on the cross reflect the intensity of His love. The Bible says about Jesus thus:
He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: Yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities....

Likewise, McKay is also overcome with a deep-seated love for his race that he lets out an impassioned wail saying "Oh when I think of my long-suffering race...."  

While in Jamaica, McKay identifies himself with the common peasant folks and downtrodden Blacks of the island. His dialect-poems are the spontaneous responses of a sympathetic heart which is attuned to the racial rhythms. He sings the inner urges, longings and foibles of a people who are rooted to the earth on which they toil. He echoes the sentiments of these gullible people with great human pity. He also establishes with a greater degree of realism how their hardy life is divided between their moiling on unyielding land on the one hand, and appeasing equally unkind masters on the other, thus in his poem, "Quashie To Buccra":

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604 The Holy Bible, Isaiah, 53:3-5.
The cowitch under which we hab fe 'toop,
De Shamar lyin' t'ick like pumpkin soup,
Is killin' somet'ing for a naygur man;
Much less de cutlass workin' in we hav'.

De sun hot like when fire ketch a town;
Shade-tree look temptin', yet we caan' lie down,
Aldough we wouldn' eben ef we could,
Causen we job must finish soon an'good.

De bush cut done, de bank dem we deh dig,
But dem caan 'tan' sake o' we naybor pig;
For so we moul' it up he root it do'n,
An' we caan' 'peak sake o'we naybor tongue.

Aldough de vine is little, it can bear;
It wantin' not'in' but a little care;
You see petater tear up groun'," you run,
You laughin', Sir, you must be t'ink a fun.

You tas'e petater an' you say it sweet,
But you no know how hard we wuk fe it;
Yet still de hardship always melt away
Wheneber it come roun' to reapin' day.

Thus, McKay's early poems are an indicator of the working
of his heart. They are also an indicator of how he is
swept away by his loving tenderness towards his race and
the problems confronting the native Blacks.

McKay is unable to cut himself loose of the strong bond
of love that binds him to his people. That is why when he
comes to America ostensibly with the idea of learning
scientific methods of agriculture, he is gravitated
towards the bedraggled race problem there.

McKay is filled with pity for the Black masses in America who are apparently unmindful of their lowly state. In spite of colour discrimination and ostracism, the Blacks in Harlem spend their time frivolously at the cabarets and speakeasies. McKay's poem "Negro Dancers" exposes their happy insensibility. Commenting on the poem Jean Wagner says that the poem is "laden with pity for this crowd without faith or hope, dizzy from the music and shouts of the dancing hall...." 607

A passionate love for the fellow Blacks, however irresponsible and reckless they might be, is working strongly in McKay. Wayne Cooper points out:

...he [McKay] felt naturally allied with those black working men and women with whom he had labored.... And it was these people, the common blacks of America's urban ghettos, who would later occupy the central place in his novels and short stories during the late 1920s and early 1930s.... 608

It is the very foundation on which the edifice of Christianity rests -- that is "to undo heavy burdens and to let the oppressed go free." 609 It is also a Christian

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607 Jean Wagner, Black Poets of the United States, p.246.
608 Wayne Cooper, The Passion of Claude McKay, p.16.
609 The Holy Bible, Isaiah, 58:6.
fundamental to "deliver the poor from him that is too strong for him, yea, the poor and the needy from him that spoileth him."\textsuperscript{610}

The more McKay broods over the insults heaped on the Blacks and the lynchings the more outraged he feels. He is filled with a righteous indignation and responds with a violent outburst of anger. Christian passion, though it be a passive virtue, does not entirely eschew violent outburst. Jesus himself got worked up against the defilers of the temple and "Cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money changers, and the seats of them that sold doves."\textsuperscript{611} McKay's anger gets sublimated as he writes poetry of defiance and protest and his poems strike at the root of slavery.

McKay's passionate concern for his fellow Blacks is an outcome of his utter selflessness. He puts aside his self and his belongings for the sake of his race. It costs him too dearly. First it costs him his job as an island constable. His compassion for the Blacks in America too has been only a constrain on his advancement in personal life and well being.

\textsuperscript{610} The Holy Bible, Psalm, 35:10.

\textsuperscript{611} Ibid., Matthew, 21:12.
McKay resigns as co-editor of "The Liberator" only because he does not compromise his racial fervour to the proletarian approach of his fellow staff. With a little shifting of his stance from race-war to one of class-war McKay could have retained his prestigious post. But then, to McKay his people and their cause mattered more than anything else. Wayne Cooper affirms how his racial zeal outweighed personal considerations saying that

With both the Workers' Dreadnought in London and the Liberator in New York he found a rare personal camaraderie, but in general with neither the British nor American left did he find the foresight regarding racial matters that he thought essential if radicals were to win the black masses to their cause.... McKay's position as a black man vitally concerned with pushing forward a black-radical perspective on a predominantly white journal created for him problems that figured prominently among the underlying reasons he finally left the Liberator....

Thus, when it comes to choosing between personal gains and racial advancement, he always puts his self aside.

McKay's selflessness is a bit too thick for an individual to bear with that it landed him in vagabondage. Though he got married, his marriage could not confine him to a settled family life. Neither did his marriage last long.

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nor did he develop any lasting ties, family or otherwise. What Ray in Banjo says is absolutely true of McKay himself. Ray says "I leave more things than I want to remember." 613

Not even personal fame could lure him to a life of self-pursuance. In fact, soon after the publication of his poem, "If We Must Die" which brought him to limelight, he left for Russia. He attended the Third Comintern as a spokesman for the Blacks. Thereafter, he travelled extensively over Europe and Africa for about twelve years fighting all along as an expatriate writer "against the spiritual genocide to which white racism condemned blacks." 614 Thus McKay's selflessness is complete and his dedication to his people absolute.

McKay's willingness to render sacrifices, suffer injustices and endure humiliation and pain is in certain degrees similar to the Christian passion as revealed in the New Testament. The Bible exhorts everyone to follow the example set forth by Jesus Christ thus:

For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endures grief, suffering wrongfully... When ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable

613 McKay, Banjo, p.293.
with God. ...because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps ... Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree.... 615

In true Christian spirit McKay suffered a lot of hardship and bore them patiently for the sake of his fellow Blacks. He had been more wronged against than committing wrongs. For no mistake of his, he was insulted, victimized and roughened up. He bore the curse of the entire race upon himself. For, when as a dramatic critic, McKay went to a theatre to witness Leonid Andreyev's play "He, the one who gets slapped," he was curtly shown his place and humiliated. He was abruptly reminded of his colour and hence his lowly state. He says:

The important fact, with which I was suddenly slapped in the face, was my color. I am a Negro.... I sat there, apart, alone, black and shrouded in blackness, quivering in every fiber, my heart denying itself and hiding from every gesture of human kindliness, hard in its belief that kindliness is to be found in no nation or race.... 616

Apart from the personal loss of dignity and self-respect that debilitates McKay, he is despondent that his race has been denied its human status. He laments in "Enslaved" thus:

615 The Holy Bible, I Peter, 2:19-24.
616 McKay, Long Way From Home, pp.144-145.
In the great life line of the Christian West;
And in the Black Land disinherit ed,
Robbed in the ancient country of its birth....

McKay's grief and suffering on his personal count pale
into insignificance when he contemplates the miseries and
oppression endured by his race. But for the people whom
he loves and shares his feelings with, McKay says that:

I would be wandering in distant fields
Where man, and bird, and beast, lives leisurely,
And the old earth is kind, and ever yields
Her kindly gifts to all her children free;
Where life is fairer, lighter, less demanding,
And boys and girls have time and space for play
Before they come to years of understanding --
Somewhere I would be singing, far away.
For life is greater than the thousand wars
Men wage for it in their insatiate lust,
And will remain like the eternal stars,
When all that shines today is drift and dust....

But that cannot be, because McKay has sacrificed
everything personal for the greater cause of racial
salvation. He has bartered away his happiness and peace
of mind thus in his poem "Adolescence".

But now no balm--nor drug nor weed nor wine--
Can bring true rest to cool my body's fever
Nor sweeten in my mouth the acrid brine,
That salts my choicest drink and will
forever....

As St. Paul asserts: "... not seeking mine own profit but the profit of many that they may be saved," McKay also seals his personal will within the larger framework of the racial goal. He braves the vicissitudes of fortune, suffers the slings of many and endures the carping tongues of his hostile critics because his "primary concern was the well being of his race." 

Jesus Christ, while preaching the doctrine of universal love says:

> Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.... Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets....

And Jesus takes to task the religious zealots like the high priests, Saducees and Pharisees for their hypocrisy. McKay also, while subscribing to the Christian doctrine of love, exposes the hypocrisy of the White practitioners of the religion. The Christian tenet only backfires on those denigraters and McKay is quick to capitalize on it in his poem, "Look Within". It is worth quoting the poem in full:

620 The Holy Bible, I Corinthians, 10:33.
621 Wayne Cooper, The Passion of Claude McKay, p.17.
Lord, let me not be silent while we fight
   In Europe Germans, Asia Japanese
For setting up a Fascist way of might
   While fifteen million Negroes on their knees
Pray for salvation from the Fascist yoke
   Of these United States. Remove the beam
(Nearly two thousand years since Jesus spoke)
   From your own eyes before the mote you deem
It proper from your neighbour's to extract!
   We bathe our lies in vapors of sweet myrrh,
And close our eyes not to perceive the fact!
   But Jesus said: You Whited sepulchre,
Pretending to be Uncorrupt of sin,
   While worm-infested, rotten
through within!.623

Yet again, McKay reaffirms the same idea in his Long Way
From Home:

I thought that the adoption of the Christ cult
by Western Civilization was its curse: it gave
modern civilization its hypocritical facade,
for its existence depended upon force and
positive exploitation, whereas Jesus was weak
and negative....624

It is interesting to note that the Blacks were among the
first to embrace Christianity. McKay points out the fact
in his poem, "The Wise Men of the East" as follows:

Oh, One was black of the wise men of the East,
Who came with precious gifts to Jesus' birth,
A symbol all men equal were at least,
When Godhead condescended to the earth.
The Ethiopian in Jerusalem
Was human to the preacher of our Lord,
Who drawn to him as to a precious gem,
Bestowed on him the message of the Word.

Yes, and a great Black Empire was the first,
To change itself into a Christian nation,
Long before Rome its pagan fetters burst
And purged itself for Jesus Christ's oblation...

It is ironical at the same time that these early Christians were betrayed by Christians themselves. The European Whites who came under the garb of traders betrayed them to be trampled underfoot by "the serried crush of trampling White feet." 626

Beginning with this betrayal which is similar to that of Judas Iscariot, there has been the shedding of innocent blood. And McKay takes up the cross on his own self and suffers for the suffering race. His heart breaks under the burden of his agony saturate with "the miseries and pains of these harsh days" 627 and it bleeds.

The Bible says that "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken...heart, O God, thou will not despise." 628 In the Gethsemane of world's inter-racial social arena the innocent Blacks break their heart upon the rock of color discrimination. McKay's alter ego Ray

626 McKay, Banjo, p.314.
628 The Holy Bible, Psalm, 51:17.
in his novel Banjo draws a parallel to illustrate how the shedding of innocent blood is but a sport to the raucous crowd. He says:

As the rag is to the bull, so is the composite voice of the Negro--speech, song and laughter--to a bawdy world. More exasperating, indeed, than the Negro's being himself is his primitive color....

Except for a few fire-brands who manage to break through the hedge to wreak vengeance on the enemy ranks, the vast majority of the Blacks remains silent sufferers. McKay, on his part, though resents the humiliation, bears it out patiently. As the apostle James exhorts "...let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." McKay endures pain and suffering triumphantly though at the same time registering his protest emphatically.

McKay suffers pain and loss and cries out "O tears of passion saturate with brine." To that extent his lonely heart is burdened with the spiritual agony of his race. And he prays to God: "Oh Lord! My body and my heart too break--" Commenting on this line Elimimian says that

629 McKay, Banjo, p.314.
630 The Holy Bible, James, 1:4.
The Poem [Tiger] ends with an appeal to the Lord to strengthen the poet and renew his hopes...

The poet prays for more strength to endure more pain so that the suffering race may be saved. Thus McKay wears the crown of thorns with dignity.

In furtherance of this redemptive dolour and as a fitting finale to the passion, McKay has employed the Crucifixion image. As Arthur P. Davis points out McKay has made "subtle and designedly ambiguous suggestion of Christ's crucifixion" in his poem "The Lynching". The symbol of crucified Christ is made all the more specific and significant in another poem "To the White Fiends". The crucified Christ at once stands for the poet as well as for the persecuted race. Addison Gayle comments on this poem thus:

The symbolism is open to quick interpretation. The speaker, Afric's son, Black man from a 'black land where black deeds are done', is ordained by God to civilize the white fiends. Afric's son is the symbolic Christ figure, whose reason for existence is to bring salvation to whites. Martyred upon the cross of racial injustice, he effects, through his sacrifice, their salvation and light...
Being a free-thinker McKay has expressed no allegiance to any religion in particular. He has declared thus:

I was always religious-minded as some of my pagan poems attest. But I never had any faith in revealed religion....

Nevertheless, the Christian influence is only too apparent. Christian passion pervades his works and is manifest in his life too. Thus, without being a Christian, McKay has carried the Christian virtue to its rich fruition.

Similarly Tchicaya U Tam' si is also influenced by the Christian passion. It qualifies his every action, conditions the working of his mind and pervades his poetic creations. It manifests itself in its varied aspects throughout the life and works of this Congolese poet, who by the exigencies of circumstances is forced to live apart from his people in France. Thus he develops a strong bond of love for his people and his country which separation, neither by time nor space, could obliterate. But rather, they serve only to intensify the love which flows through his body and down the channels of the river Congo thus:

Toilers also
my filth, the slow waters, my sadness,
following the ways of this river to the sea....

Tchicaya's love both for the people and the country is
working strongly in him. It quickens to a self-consuming
passion as is evident from Tchicaya's own admission:

I had in my belly the cancer of love....

Time and again Tchicaya alludes to the obscurity of his
parentage in equal terms with the historical tragedy of
his own country. Gerald Moore says that when Tchicaya in
A Triche-Coeur speaks of his orphanage and forgotten
ancestry he

...resolves a part of his personal dilemma
before embarking on his more active
involvement with that of his people...the
mother's vindication of her flesh will be that
of the suffering Congo also, for the poem
speaks of 'discovering in sorrow/three
centuries of her life'....

Unconditioned and unqualified love which is pivotal to
Christian passion holds the poet in sway as he watches
the bloody riots of 1959-61 in Congo. Gerald Moore says:

The first part of Epitome reads like a poetic diary of these events, in which their initial impact is recreated, their meaning sought in the deeper perspective of all other events suffered by the same or other colonized peoples...  

Love being the mainstay of the poet, he views the devastation brought about by the aerial bombings in a more personalized fashion. Thus "he is both literally and imaginatively closer to the experience of his people." Tchicaya writes in "The Dead" thus:

And three gangs covered with leaves
the fireflies desert them and run to town
three gangs...

Oh! keep my mother quiet tell her I know
how to write without blue lines
on paper white and red
to summarize my passion
the names of my fathers and mothers
and the bird singing their death
without consulting the rules
making nonsense of our arithmetic
the simple division right and left
each bank of the river
strange to the bed of the river...  

Tchicaya grows lovesick for his people who are leading a precarious living. His sad heart feels the barrenness thus: "But love for love/is surely more desolating than

641 Ibid., p.162.
the rest. "643 And he lets out "the great 'cries of passion' earlier saluted by L.S. Senghor". 644

The intensity of Tchicaya's passionate involvement through love makes possible the giving away of his self for the greater cause of his people. Tchicaya does not lead a life of personal fulfilment. Rather he abdicates his pleasures, material benefits and other comforts.

Had he set his eyes on personal advancement, he could have, as the son of a diplomat, earned State sponsorship and earned fame and fortune. But Tchicaya does not choose to connive at the goings-on in Congo but stands out as a selfless poet. His selflessness and self-abnegation deepen as he watches the carnage in Congo. Gerald Moore makes out a case and says:

Contemplating the dead of the Congo and viewing their deaths in the perspective of a colonial history peculiarly disastrous even by African standards, Tchicaya is able to see his personal situation as something transcended by the fate of others apparently more 'typically' Congolese.... 645

Gerald Moore also argues that Tchicaya superscribes the poem "They are dead" because the river "invites the poet

645 Ibid., p.158.
to wash off his deep sense of personal guilt in the waters which carry the Congolese dead to the sea." The poem reads thus:

Live; wash off your guilt
They are dead....

Thus with a greater zeal he seals his fate with the destiny of his country and says: "I have lived long without memory." His selfless passion for the country is so much that it becomes an obsession and a heavy burden on his heart thus:

what country
but I am raving
tie a stone to my death
so that my heart is heavy....

Not only does he sympathize with his people as their spokesman, but he also offers his body figuratively as an altar of sacrifice for the regeneration of both his self and the country. Gerald Moore affirms that

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646 Gerald Moore, "The Uprooted Tree," p.158.
647 Tchicaya, Quoted in "The Uprooted Tree," p.158.
649 Idem.
Tchicaya continues to search for the tree of his origins, he pummels and dissects his own belly to find the meaning of rebirth within the giant fact of death in the Congo of those years....

Christian passion which embodies selfless sacrifice induces the poet to give up everything for the sake of his country. He is ready to forgo even his life. He goes to the extent of challenging the effectiveness of the electric chair in bringing about his death because he already possesses the power of self-immolation. He says:

I recreate my head with all the new sciences
the electric chair

but I am well sheltered under my skin
I am already my own funeral oven....

Wilfred Cartey explains the fact that "The correlation of life, death, and freedom suggest the poet's desire for mystical sacrifice to save his Congo." The stage is set for his sacrifice. Tchicaya says in "My Head is Perfumed" thus:

Come tonight my head is perfumed
my sweat is good resin

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650 Gerald Moore, "The Uprooted Tree," p.162.
652 Wilfred Cartey, Whispers From A Continent, p.264.
come tonight and light your lamps
the night will come
my soul is ready . . . . 653

Commenting on these lines Wilfred Cartey says that through sacrifice "purification takes place and the votive lamp is rekindled." 654

Tchicaya's love for his people is not only sacrificial in the giving of self, it is also self-consuming and it entails pain and suffering. It enlarges the context of his suffering from personal negation to interpersonal and endemic malaise.

Grief accentuated by loss and suffering is the leit motif in his poems that Ibitokun calls Tchicaya's Le Mauvais Sang a "threnody suffused with irony, humour and indignation." 655

In accordance with the Christian passion Tchicaya undergoes intense emotional tumult and psychic pulls and counter pulls and sturm und drang. Ibitokun sums it up saying:

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653 Tchicaya, "My Head is Perfumed," Quoted in Cartey's Whispers From A Continent, pp.267-268.


Slavery, colonialism and their attendant evils are historical truths that provoke in Tchicaya a 'Mauvais Sang'. Metonymically, he is that 'Mauvais Sang'. Crucial though they may be to his poetry, slavery and colonialism have always remained in the background. It is their attendant psychic warping or dehydration that seems to appeal more to the poet. We could say that his poetry is not a 'poe'sie de situations' but really a 'poe'sie d'effect....

Tchicaya is being tormented by the relentless tides of anguish caused by his misfortunes and sheds a river of tears that he quizzically asks: "Who will tie the waves and tears / together?" Ibitokun says that "the pangs of regret are the more intense as the poet realizes that his intelligence has been played upon". Tchicaya laments:

"the whole body of the poet is writhing in the anguish" caused by this angst that he confesses:

my nightmare is like myself
also in death I shall have no light death....

660 Ibitokun, "The Hemorrhage of Time," p.34.
As Wilfred Cartey points out:

The poet [Tchicayaj has undergone not only slaughter but has suffered from exclusion and non-participation....

Tchicaya takes it in his stride. With stoic endurance he courageously calls upon the callous world to "use more green pepper when you stroke my living wounds!"

Apart from the solitude suffered in exile, Tchicaya has suffered loss and death of close friends and allies. The murder of Lumumba has been a death blow to him*. Besides these personal losses Tchicaya suffers on his person the country's agony. In "Strange Agony" he bemoans his own and the country's tragedy thus:

the lightning which shatters the night
shows me the tree of my origin
it was written in fire and flames
that I should have muscles swelling
like the tidal bore
and two geysers...
instead of eyes

I write that wind
in capitals of hungry grass
the dead slink there
sneezing shamefully of their death
those who did not die easily
have the ruts of cars

662 Wilfred Cartey, Whispers From A Continent, p.261.

663 Tchicaya, "Cradle-Song," in S P, p.84.

* This bears repetition.
the weight of buildings
the battering of trains
the pattern of railway tracks
on their death
and to injure them still more
the fire of their eyes was left to burn itself out
in the hope of relighting it at the eyes of a bitch
swollen with grazing the shadow of a poxy dog

one morning I came up black
against the light of setting suns
spitting out my heart
for every human
cradling my heart...

Thus Tchicaya has cast his lot, as Dathorne points out, with the

...black people who do not fully understand their heritage and its place in the future. These are the people who obey without thinking. The protagonist suffers for such people and for his love of his heritage....

Tchicaya's suffering is inseparable from that of his country men. He is visibly shaken in every fibre when he receives from Kinshasa flowers which attest the bloodshed thus:

but Kin sent them to me
these flowers in my letter-box.

My hands crinkle already
like these faded flowers....


\[665\] Dathorne, The Black Mind, p.382

Thus Tchicaya's agony is vicarious and empathetic. He suffers so that the whole of his race might be freed from the clutches of suffering. It bears the stamp of Christian passion. Tchicaya's suffering is so very extensive that his brows become the embankment for the sorrow that swells within. The pain that he endures is so very excruciating that he makes of his body a cross which carries the suggestion of epical and unrequited suffering. The following lines from "Low Watermark" are characteristic:

make at my brows
ramparts of dark stone
make of my mouth a horizontal
make of my hand a vertical
to sound
at the low tide of a simple love
the river which leads me to the sea
the river which leads me to death....\(^{667}\)

Tchicaya borrows freely from the Christian mythic parallels and ideas to emphasize his trials and tribulations. Being betrayed, enslaved and victimized his Christian virtues of tolerance and forbearance are put to acid test. With epic courage and a fortitude of mind he endures the Cross and the Calvary thus:

As for you my shadow of flesh
take back my other cheek
mark it with your fingers

I offer one to your dingy cheek,
Woman,
dingy with the colour of three dinars
which have betrayed me.
I give the other to your dirty hand,
brother,
dirty with the colour of three histories
My cheeks like two hills
Where the tree of my laughter had sprung....

Gerald Moore celebrates Tchicaya's "passive impotent suffering which to some extent carries on the crucifixion or castration idea."  

Tchicaya passionately equates his own suffering to that of Christ and compares the angst of his own suppressed race with that of the persecuted Jewish race. It is relevant to quote "The Scornor" here:

I drink to your glory my God
You who have made me so sad
You have given me a people who are not
distillers of gin
What wine shall I drink to your Jubilate
In this country which has no vines
In this desert all the shrubs are cactus
Shall I take their crop of flowers
for flames of the burning bush of your desire.
Tell me in what Egypt my people's feet lie chained

Christ I laugh at your sadness
Oh my sweet Christ
Thorn for thorn
we have a common crown of thorns

\footnote{668}{Tchicaya, "Viaticum," in \textit{S P}, p.61.}
\footnote{669}{Gerald Moore, "Surrealism and Negritude in the Poetry of TchiKaya U Tam'si," p.104.}
I will be converted because you tempt me
Joseph comes to me
I suck already the breast of the virgin your mother
I count more than your one Judas on my fingers

Where the world is a lamb your pascal lamb—
Christ
I will waltz to the tune of your slow sadness
Was I not your brother
I dance at your sadness
I take neither father nor mother to witness
for me but my sadness equals yours
[My Emphasis]... 670

Gerald Moore affirms that

He [Tchicaya] identifies himself and his suffering people, likewise betrayed and sold down the centuries with the Christ... 671

Tchicaya himself explicitly states that Christ only anticipated the Blacks in their sufferings thus:

Christ used a wooden cross to usurp against time
the destiny of a people more concrete than all the drawn knives of crime..... 672

Anguish and suffering notwithstanding, Tchicaya makes an impassioned attempt to reenact the Christian passion. He

672 Tchicaya, Quoted in Ibitokun's "The Hemorrhage of Time," p.36.
offers to lay down his life and thus performs the supreme sacrifice. The following lines from "My Head is Perfumed" contain overtones of Christian martyrdom:

my country inhabits me no more ...
my soul is a nail on a dead plank...

Commenting on these lines Wilfred Cartey says that "A sense of having been murdered is reiterated in the lines." 

Wearing the crown of thorns Tchicaya seeks to win the crown of glory. His immeasurable love working its way through sorrow and pain gains mystic salvation both personal and racial thus:

to hoist the harness
high in the wind
to safeguard everything
the white laughter
and the red and native Sun

in order to name it later
in golden figures
he earned his death
long live love . . .

673 Tchicaya, "My Head is Perfumed," Quoted in Wilfred Cartey's Whispers From A Continent, p.264.

674 Wilfred Cartey, Whispers From A Continent, p.264.

675 Tchicaya, "Against Destiny," Quoted in Ibid., p.266.
Thus, according to Wilfred Cartey, "Self-sacrifice is efficacious, death ensures life." Tchicaya closely follows the example set forth by Christ. He experiences the whole spectrum of the sufferings of Christ which form the essence of Christian passion.

Though Tchicaya's identification with the suffering Christ is nearly complete, he denounces Christianity. Wilfred Cartey says that "the poet harshly rejects Christianity: it had deceived him." As it has been pointed out by Gerald Moore, Tchicaya tries to discredit "the claims of a religion which historically has betrayed Africa by its collaboration with colonialism and slavery." Tchicaya exposes the treachery of the unscrupulous Christian slave traders thus:

They have already killed me in your name
betrayed and sold

Christ I hate your Christians

Your temple is full of merchants who sell
your cross Christ

four for a hundred sous
And take a chance
on the bartered Indies....

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676 Wilfred Cartey, Whispers From A Continent, p.266.
677 Ibid., p.264.
678 Gerald Moore, "Introduction", in S P, p.x.
Christianity remains a vestige of colonialism. As Dathorne puts it, "...the Christian church in Africa is a link with colonialism and thus a reason for bringing about the estrangement of African man." 680

Tchicaya is sore about St. Anne because she connives at the killings in Congo thus:

Now opposite Kinshasa
Saint Anne at her critical hour
arches her spine
And no longer has the delicate flesh of the Messiah
nor the clear blood of the Messiah. . . . 681

Gerald Moore comments thus:

He [Tchicaya] writes with a kind of anguished, loving mockery of Saint Anne, who seems to embody for him the Christian presence in the Congo (perhaps because the cathedral at Brazzaville is dedicated to her), yet feels the impotence of her god before the horrors daily enacted at Kin (Kinshasa, formerly Leopoldville), which faces Brazzaville across the wide waters of Stanley Pool.... 682

Thus, as far as Tchicaya is concerned he would rather incur the wrath of the saints than compromise on the sufferings of his people. With great dignity he bears

"the cross, the banner of negritude in overalls." Thus it is established that McKay and Tchicaya reveal remarkable resilience in their ability to withstand pain and suffering. And significantly the Christian theme of passion pervades their poetry.

Apart from these similarities they show marked differences as well. McKay raises himself to attain salvation and heavenly peace through the divinity of Christ. McKay reserves glory and thus divinity to Christ as is evident in the following lines from "A Prayer."

The wild and fiery passion of my youth consumes my soul
In agony I turn to thee for truth and self-control.

For passion and all the pleasures it can give will die the death;
But this of me eternally must live, thy borrowed breath...

But Tchicaya brings down divinity to personal level in human terms by being the human Christ. Tchicaya says:

Oh betrayed Christ behold my human wooden cross...

Ibitokun affirms it saying

685 Tchicaya, Quoted in Ibitokun's "The Hemorrhage of Time," p.36.
he [the Black man] too is the human Christ perpetually being nailed to the cross
[My Emphasis]....

Tchicaya attaches glory and thus divinity to the human. Ontologically, the man achieves divinity through his Christ-like suffering and purgation. As far as Tchicaya is concerned, as Ibitokun points out, "his whole race is composed of suffering Christs in time and space."  

There are definite phases in McKay's spiritual experience. One detects a progressive spiritual growth in the Christian faith. From his religious indifference as a free thinker McKay develops faith in Christ. First he dislikes Protestantism and later embraces Catholicism because he finds in it "the one true International of Peace and Good Will to all men."  

On the other hand, Tchicaya begins as a Christian and ends as a pagan with intermittent changes in his attitude ranging from implicit faith to indifference. When asked about the nature of his destiny after death Tchicaya quipps thus:

687 Idem.
688 McKay, Quoted in Stephen H. Bronz's Roots of Negro Racial Consciousness, p.89.
To be a pagan at the pagan renewal
of the world....

McKay is optimistic. His optimism is based on the
Christian belief that God alone is the true succour. He
reposes his faith in God and so he says in "The Pagan
Isms" thus:

And so to God I go to make my peace,
Where black nor white can follow to betray.
My pent-up heart to Him I will release
And surely He will show the perfect way
Of life. For He will lead me and no man
Can violate or circumvent His plan.

Tchicaya too is optimistic. But his optimism is based on
the dynamics of human history. He declares:

No more sleep I sound the alarums
In the nook of a sky oh vulture time ill-user
You won't have me I'll come out victorious
My eye pupil is metal my laughter iron
I unhoused winds because ears must
hear me....

Tchicaya is the new being, the bronze, "the Christ-like
and anti-Christ poet," as Ibitokun calls him.

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691 Tchicaya, Quoted in Ibitokun's "The Hemorrhage of Time", p.39.
Thus more than the Rainbow and the Star, it is the Cross that has a special appeal to the Black poets particularly McKay and Tchicaya.

It is precisely because the Passion of Christ richly corresponds to the angst and suffering of the Blacks as the exploited, denied, and the downtrodden race. It is through the Passion of Christ the Blacks gain true knowledge and significance of life and death and hold on to the hope of a better tomorrow.

Incidentally the Passion of Christ has held a special and unique appeal of value, significance and consequence to the modern world and to the American intellectuals such as Walt Whitman, William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Ernest Hemingway and Edward Estlin Cummings to quote a few. All the American intellectuals and the Blacks found meaning to life and relate the Passion of Christ to life situations.