

**Where Prolivity is Art: Understanding the Francophone African
Novels of Ahmadou Kourouma / *Quando prolixidade é arte: entendendo os
romances francófonos africanos de Ahmadou Kourouma***

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the fiction of the West African Ivorian writer, Ahmadou Kourouma has remained a challenge to critics primarily due to his powerful use of African rhythm, register and lexicon to create a new French through Malinke, his mother tongue. Although language is central to the understanding of Francophone literature, the classical approach has consisted in narrowly focusing on language from a linguistic point of view. Arguing that literary criticism limited to the isolated meditation on textual or contextual parameters ignores the creative dimension of art in the novel, this paper attempts to adopt Bakhtin's poetics of the dialogical to Kourouma's novel, *Allah is Not Obligated*, to understand the living principle (of dialogic threads) that animates and binds the entire work.

KEYWORDS: Dialogism; Prolivity; Hidden Polemic; Postcolonial

RESUMO

*A ficção de Ahmadou Kourouma, escritor africano da Costa do Marfim, tem constituído um desafio para os críticos, sobretudo pelo intenso uso do registro, do léxico e do ritmo africanos com o escopo de criar um novo idioma francês através do malinkê, língua materna do autor. Embora a linguagem seja central para o entendimento da literatura francófona, a abordagem crítica tradicional tem dado pouca ênfase a esses romances de um ponto de vista linguístico. Propondo que a crítica literária limitada à reflexão isolada de parâmetros contextuais ou textuais ignora a dimensão criativa da arte no romance, este trabalho busca adotar a poética do dialogismo de Bakhtin na leitura do romance *Alá e as crianças-soldados*, de Kourouma, para compreender o princípio (de linha dialógica) que anima e articula todo o trabalho.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Dialogismo; Prolixidade; Polêmica velada; Pós-colonial

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The tendency to approach the Francophone African novel from a linguistic or socio-historical perspective has, for some time, been common in terms of interpretation and criticism. The same applies to the tendency to understand the politics of language use by an African writer as translating his/her African identity. While investigations of this nature have been fruitful in gaining some insights into the novel, they have ignored the subtle dynamics of language in artistic literary creation. Consequently, the Francophone African novel has come to be regarded more as a political pamphlet, a historical document or a sociological base of information than as a work of art.

The study and critical interpretation of the novels of the West African writer Ahmadou Kourouma (1927-2003) is no exception. Kourouma is known as a second generation novelist in the history of Francophone African literature whose writing appeared during the post-Independence period of the late 1960s and the 1970s. Like most African writers of his generation, Kourouma drew his inspiration from historic events, his novels dwelling on precise historic periods through which his country passed. Combined with this inescapable historical dimension, was a powerful insider's portrayal of the African society that gave his fiction a sociological thrust. But Kourouma was also known for his originality in writing, and his first novel *Les Soleils des Indépendances* (1968)¹ created a stir in literary circles for his innovation of transposing African syntactic structures into French. In a way, the novel heralded a new era of thinking, writing, and understanding language.

In the post-Independence times in which Kourouma's first novel *Les Soleils des Indépendances* (1968) appeared, postcolonial critics were quick to uphold the work as a brilliant example of linguistic subversion.² Studies on the novel soon took the usual turn towards its historical and political associations. Jacques Chévrier (1984), in his categorization of African literature, classified it as the "novel of disenchantment" ("disenchantment" that came after Independence) whereas the language in the novel became

¹ The novel was initially refused by editors in France, and Kourouma finally succeeded in publishing it for the first time in Quebec after some major omissions and corrections. It was later published by Editions du Seuil, Paris in 1970. See doctoral dissertation of Ekoungoun (2005). The novel was translated as *The Suns of Independence* by Adrian Adams in 1981 (KOUROUMA, Ahmadou. *The Suns of Independence*. Translated from French by Adrian Adams. Teaneck, NJ: Holmes & Meier, 1981).

² See Chantal Zabus (1991).

the object of linguistic analyses of the Africanized French syntax, African vocabulary, and expression.

The novels of Kourouma sparked the attention of researchers when his novel *Allah is Not Obliged* (2007)³ won the prestigious literary award of France, the Prix Renaudot. The linguistic-literary analyses that followed studied various aspects of his writing.⁴ Scholars from Africa inaugurated anthropological studies on the novel, linked to the African experience and imagination,⁵ to find what Abiola Irele called the “specific character” of African literature (1990, p.9). However, the predominance of political and thematic readings at the expense of aesthetics, created a lacuna in Francophone literary criticism, besides leaving certain questions on the form unanswered.

The Need for an Alternative Approach

The novels of Ahmadou Kourouma have benefited from several readings although the political imperative of his fiction has been very strong. While attention was seldom paid to form, it was limited to aspects of style such as rhythm, orality, proverbs, African idioms or techniques of appropriation of the colonizer’s language. These studies were highly selective in nature, reductive in a sense, as they tended to exclude aspects of the novel that did not fall within the purview of textual examination. Moreover, a generalizing assumption that all post-colonial African literature was a response to the colonial enterprise led to a stereotypic politicization of art.

³ KOUROUMA, Ahmadou. *Allah is Not Obliged*. Translated by Frank Wynne. New York: Anchor Books, 2007.

⁴ Justin Bisanswa in *The Adventure of the Epic and the Novel in Ahmadou Kourouma’s Writings* (2007) studies the form of Kourouma’s novels to conclude that the form is a blend of the epic and the novel. Christiane Ndiaye and Jean Ouédraogo’s *Kourouma, the Myth: The Rhetoric of the Commonplace in Kourouma Criticism* (2007) deals with the politics of writing and shows how Kourouma creates authentic African prose to free the African novel from French domination. Amadou Koné in *Discourse in Kourouma’s Novels: Writing Two Languages to Translate Two Realities* (2007) examines the uneasy relationship between the use of Malinké and French in Kourouma’s writing. Carrol Coates (2007) relates the fiction of Kourouma to his real life with special reference to the West African dictator Houphouët Boigny.

⁵ See Lobna Mestaoui (2012).

The complexity of Kourouma's œuvre continued to baffle critics who questioned an inherent contradiction relating to voices and value-systems in his novels. Commenting on the inconsistency of the child-narrator's voice, Madeleine Borgomano called *Allah is not obliged* one of Kourouma's "less original," "less radical" works with a mature adult narrator often taking over from the child (2004, pp.141-42).⁶ For the same reason, Heidi Bojsen found problematic the use of direct speech in the novel that was not a realist portrait of the thoughts and emotional disturbances of a child (2011, p.175). With reference to value-systems, Isabelle Constant remained inconclusive on the question of the child-narrator's status: anti-hero or author's mouth-piece? (p.66)⁷ while Lajri Nadra questioned the form and functioning of Kourouma's narrative in the following terms:

This "chatter" apparently fragmented, incoherent and long-winded, is in fact constructed, organized and coherent; one may ask whether Kourouma is critical of the character's "chatter" as an emphatic category (of discourse) or whether he tries to oppose it with a rationalistic counter-discourse while criticizing rationalistic "false-discourses" on African history (2010, p.92, my translation).⁸

The problems evoked by researchers point to an inadequacy of stylistic methods to explain problems related to the form of Kourouma's novel and the need for an alternative conceptual framework suited to aesthetics. I, therefore, propose to read Kourouma's novel, *Allah is not obliged*, with the help of Bakhtin's metalinguistic theory that enables an elaborate investigation into the language-matrix of the novel in relation to its specific historical context. The reading takes up criticism from the position of the character in the novel, in trying to understand the reason for his prolixity, and thereby, the author's overall artistic design.

⁶ In the original: "Enfin, dans *Allah n'est pas obligé*, c'est le langage d'un enfant qui se trouve non pas imité mais reconstruit. L'entreprise est moins originale et moins radicale aussi, car la parole est souvent reprise par une instance beaucoup plus savante".

⁷ Isabelle Constant's article *Figures de l'ironie dans Quand on refuse on dit non* in *L'Imaginaire d'Ahmadou Kourouma* (OUÉDRAOGO, 2010, pp.65-85) is on Ahmadou Kourouma's fifth novel, *Quand on refuse on dit non* (2004), which is a sequel to *Allah n'est pas obligé* [*Allah is Not Obligated* (2007)], wherein one finds the same child-soldier narrator, Birahima.

⁸ In the original: "Ce 'bavardage' en apparence fragmentaire, décousu et dilaté, est en fait construit, organisé et cohérent; on peut se demander si Kourouma critique le 'bavardage' en tant que discours emphatique, ou s'il tente de lui opposer un discours rationnel, tout en critiquant les 'pseudo-discours' rationnels sur l'histoire de l'Afrique".

Bakhtin's Theory of the Novel: Some Key Concepts

Bakhtin defines the novel as a “diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (1986b, p.262). In the world, “ideologically saturated” (1986b, p.271) discourses come into contact and confront one another over time. They are said to be dialogically interrelated. But in the novel, according to Bakhtin, this task of organizing social languages and voices “artistically” so as to allow for their interaction rests with the novelist. The novel is, in this sense, not just a story but a forum for debate due to the interaction among speakers, languages, and world-views.

While dialogical confrontation is a natural consequence of the plurality of languages, world views, “dialogue,” according to Bakhtin, is by no means a resolution of conflict. Rather, “dialogue” in the Bakhtinian sense implies an ongoing struggle among “specific points of view on the world” which “may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically” (1986b, p.292). This endless play of languages knows no finalization. At a certain time, one language may seem to triumph over another, but it cannot claim ultimate victory as Bakhtin believes “*the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken*” (1984, p.166; emphasis in original).

The novelist, according to Bakhtin, draws on the languages of social heteroglossia to structure his artistic work on dialogic principles. Languages in the novel, thus being dialogically interrelated to extra-linguistic historical contexts, cannot be studied by linguistic tools of analysis. Justifying the need for a new methodology that he termed “metalinguistic” to study language as it exists in life, in Dostoevsky's novels, Bakhtin explains:

We have entitled our chapter “*Discourse* in Dostoevsky,” for we have in mind *discourse*, that is, language in its concrete living totality, and not language as the specific object of linguistics, something arrived at through a completely legitimate and necessary abstraction from various aspects of the concrete life of the word (1984, p.181; emphasis in original).

The dialogic principle that Bakhtin sees as operative in the novel and that he considers natural to language in society is based on the coexistence of multiple languages as specific world views of speakers and their lively, often violent, intersection in historical time. Whether in real life or in the novel, the condition of language existing as multiple heteroglot opinion complicates the speech of a speaker whose words inevitably collide with other accented languages or “words of the other,” while trying to describe the object of discourse. Such being the importance of the “words of the other” in the dialogic view of language, the listener as “other” assumes paramount importance to the speaker in serving as the guiding principle of conversation, for, as Bakhtin says, “The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction” (1986b, p.280).

The Talking Character Birahima in *Allah is Not Obligated*

While it is true that the novels of Ahmadou Kourouma are predominantly “historical” and “realist,” set as they are during turning points in West African history, the other noteworthy feature that comes to the fore is the discursive span of his novels. The narrators of Kourouma’s fiction are adept at the art of story-telling in the manner of the traditional story-tellers of the local African oral tradition who perfected this art over centuries. Blending facts from memory with beliefs, pieces of reported discourse, proverbs and songs, they churn out a telling narrative, the complexity of which cannot be denied. Commenting on this aspect of his novels, Jean Ouédraogo writes of Ahmadou Kourouma:

The man’s vocation was to provoke discussion, to invite the master speakers, the fine talkers, the professional flatterers (griots, sora, djeli, interpreters, politicians), to join in these debates on the great evils where neither coarse words nor words of wisdom and beauty would be lacking (2004, p.iv).

In his last two novels, *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000) [*Allah is Not Obligated* (2007)]⁹ and *Quand on Refuse on Dit Non* (2004, incomplete, posthumously published), Kourouma accords his child narrator-protagonist, Birahima, a larger talking role. And despite Ouédraogo and Dakouo's assertion that "Kourouma's narrator is generally 'talkative' and his argumentative stance restricts the verbal dialogue in his novels" (2011, p.49, my translation),¹⁰ it would be more accurate to say that the responsiveness, choice of words and changes of tone of Kourouma's narrators animate dialogic encounters whose resonance is felt not only in the text but beyond it in real life.

In Kourouma's novel, *Allah is Not Obligated* (2007),¹¹ the principal protagonist and narrator, Birahima, is a ten- or twelve-year-old boy (as he describes himself) who narrates his traumatizing experiences as child soldier in tribal war stricken West Africa. As the story unfolds, the little Birahima has to leave his home in the Ivory Coast due to the death of his mother to find his aunt Mahan in Liberia. On the journey, he is accompanied by the sorcerer Yacouba. While crossing the border into Liberia, they are captured by the rebel camp, and Birahima is forced to become a child soldier. Thereafter, they experience misery, starvation, destruction, and the folly of dictators.

The novel opens in an unconventional way with Birahima's long self-introduction that runs for more than 4 pages. At the outset, he seems to be a chirpy little child who speaks informally in Pidgin French as he begins with the long title of his story: "The full, final and completely complete title of my bullshit story is: *Allah is not obliged to be fair about all the things he does here on earth*. Okay. Right. I better start explaining some stuff" (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.1; emphasis in original).¹²

The fairly long introduction by Birahima covers six points which include his education, his talkative nature and his not being respectful of African customs and traditions, having to leave home as a child in inevitable circumstances. The point Birahima makes in a strange mix of slang, colonial vocabulary, African idioms and child-talk is that he was

⁹ See footnote 3.

¹⁰ In the original: "Le narrateur de Kourouma est généralement 'bavard', presque logomachique, de sorte que le dialogue verbal est peu développé dans ses récits".

¹¹ See footnote 3.

¹² See footnote 3.

alienated from his own land killing “lots of guys” (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.3)¹³ as child-soldier, and, therefore, his mannerisms do not fit the African culture. This is undoubtedly a way of contextualizing and preparing the reader to accept what he has to say by correcting a certain fixed notion of the African child that the reader may have in mind. But Birahima seems to be overly prolix throughout the narration, using a lot of words and four dictionaries to express himself. In point 5 of his introduction he justifies his need for dictionaries, exposing an impressive and inconceivable project of reaching out to a wide and composite audience, that includes his colonizer:¹⁴

The dictionaries are for looking up big words and checking big words and particularly for explaining big words. I need to be able to explain stuff because I want all sorts of different people to read my bullshit: colonial *toubabs*, Black Nigger African Natives and anyone that can understand French (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.3).¹⁵

Birahima’s informal child-like expression, his self-portrait of a talkative person and his labeling of his story as “blablabla,”¹⁶ give a wrong lead to the reader who tends to ignore the seriousness of his enterprise. The African child-character’s convening of the East and the West on a common platform to listen to his story is given a direct interpretation in Jean Ouédraogo and Yves Dakouo’s full-length analysis of the novel as a dialogue between Francophone listeners and languages, without hinting at the effervescence that such a dialogue between distinct, hierarchical languages and world-views may produce in the post-colonial context of the novel. An extract from the study is quoted below:

The narrative strategy is designed to facilitate a dialogue between different speakers of the francophone world. But behind the narrator’s naming of geographically differentiated groups of people as his audience, one uncovers a different intention: that of opening a dialogue between speakers who do not speak in the same language register... The use of parenthetical

¹³ See footnote 3.

¹⁴ Lajri Nadra opines that Kourouma pays attention to form at the expense of meaning, to language at the expense of message... and questions the use of dictionaries in a context where everything is in disorder and in a story meant to witness and denounce (OUÉDRAOGO, 2010, p.106).

¹⁵ See footnote 3.

¹⁶ In Frank Wynn’s English translation, the word “blablabla” is translated as “bullshit story.”

explanations either in the standard French or in local diction justify this communicative strategy although the tendency is to privilege the popular African mode of expression (OUÉDRAOGO; DAKOUO, 2011, p.55, my translation).¹⁷

Let us examine the first point of Birahima's introduction to understand what he is actually doing by talking so much.

First off, Number one ... My name is Birahima and I'm a little nigger. Not 'cos I'm black and I'm a kid. I'm little nigger because I can't talk French for shit. That's how things are. You might be a grown-up, or old, you might be Arab, or Chinese, or white, or Russian- or even American- if you talk bad French, it is called *parler petit nègre*- little nigger talking- so that makes you a little nigger too. That's the rules of French for you (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.1).¹⁸

A careful reading, rather listening to Birahima's utterance, reveals that it is not plain talk but a discourse carefully framed in context. Birahima is not stating facts, the negation and justification in his discourse carry a strong note of persuasion. He is responding to the question he anticipates in the mind of his interlocutor. His hidden dialogue¹⁹ (with the question of the interlocutor effaced) is in some ways similar to the justificatory stance that Bakhtin identifies in the dialogue between Makar Devushkin and Varenka in Dostoevsky's novel *Poor Folk* (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.210) except that they are driven by different motives. When Devushkin describes his room, which is nothing more than a niche behind the kitchen, in a letter to Varenka, he is afraid of the impression it may create in her mind. Anticipating her negative reaction, he defends his choice of room as if to reply to her comments. But Birahima's hidden dialogue is neither anxious nor troubled as Devushkin's. By introducing the questions Birahima anticipates, in the mind of his interlocutor, his apparent monologue

¹⁷ In the original: "La stratégie communicative du narrateur consiste à instaurer un dialogue entre les différents locuteurs de la francophonie. Mais derrière cette typologie générale des destinataires fondée sur les aires géographiques du français, on décèle un autre dessein dans la stratégie du narrateur: celui de permettre un dialogue avec les narrataires qui ne parlent pas dans le même register... Cette option communicative explique l'insertion de certaines parenthèses centrées soit sur des mots soutenus, soit sur des termes populaires, même si la tendance principale est de privilégier le narrataire 'populaire'".

¹⁸ See footnote 3.

¹⁹ Bakhtin's category of "hidden dialogue" implies a dialogue with another voice in which the question of the interlocutor is effaced. In other words, the speech of a speaker is a hidden dialogue when it is apparently monologic but is sequenced as responses to anticipated questions from the interlocutor.

(cited above), which may be shown to be a dialogue between equals triggered by the ignorant gaze of his interlocutor, ironically from the West:

- Birahima: My name is Birahima and I'm a little nigger
- Interlocutor (question effaced): Oh! so you are Black and small?
- Birahima: *Not* 'cos I'm black and I'm a kid. I'm little nigger *because* I can't talk French for shit.
- Interlocutor (question effaced): How strange?
- Birahima: That's how things are.
- Interlocutor (question effaced): I seem to understand. So, little Africans, like you, who don't speak good French, are little niggers, is that what you mean?
- Birahima: You might be a grown-up, or old, you might be Arab, or Chinese, or white, or Russian- *or even American* - if you talk bad French, it is called *parler petit nègre*- little nigger talking- so that makes you a little nigger too. That's the rules of French for you (emphasis mine).

It is now understandable why Birahima's introduction is so long. Not content with dispensing information about himself, he engages in dialogue with the "other." A habitual monologic self-introduction, not oriented towards the "other," would not extend beyond a few sentences. The negation "Not 'cos I'm black" and the justification that follows "I'm little nigger because ..." may be explained dialogically in the following manner. No sooner had Birahima pronounced the word "nigger" than he anticipated a derogatory evaluation of the word (given to it from past usages, here the colonial past) in the mind of his interlocutor. In colonial times, the word "nigger" was a disdainful epithet to mean a little African boy who could not speak good French. Birahima rejects this evaluation with the negation in his utterance while adding a new meaning that is apt to the postcolonial context. According to his re-evaluation of the word, "nigger" applies to anyone of the global community (of the most advanced of countries as he notes "or even American") who cannot speak good French.

Birahima appropriates a word from the colonial context "nigger" to fit it into the changed postcolonial context. On the appropriation of a word to give it a new meaning, Bakhtin writes in the essay *Discourse in the novel*:

[...] the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language [...] but rather it exists in other people's mouth, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. [...] Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process (1986b, p.294).

Birahima not only corrects the colonial version of the word but also hints at the arrogance of the French (the colonizer) with respect to the importance they attach to their language. The utterance "That's the rules of French for you" is emphatic, an imitation of colonial authority (he speaks like his colonizer). Birahima's innocent utterance seen in this light is in fact a hidden polemic²⁰ intended at the colonizer.

Similarly, other points in Birahima's introduction, apparently intended to break linguistic barriers, stem from deep ideological convictions, as the following utterance shows:

But going to primary school for three years doesn't make you all autonomous and incredible. You know a bit, but not enough; you end up being what Black Nigger African Natives call grilled on both sides. You're not an indigenous savage any more like the rest of the Black Nigger African Natives 'coz you can understand the civilized Blacks and the *toubabs* (a *toubab* is a white person) and work out what they're saying ... (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.2).²¹

Birahima (the speaker) orients his discourse towards two language systems, the African and the colonial, each with its own conceptual horizons, thereby incorporating words from both systems into his discourse. He describes his level of education from both perspectives. The use of tendentious colonial vocabulary "savage" and "civilized Blacks" (foreign to the African conceptual system) to describe his countrymen create a tension in his bilingual discourse that has led critics to question his value system.²² A keen listening to the intonation of this utterance reveals that, apart from words with racist connotations "savage" and "civilized," there are words with non-racist connotations that are equally foreign to the

²⁰ The "hidden polemic" in this case is an attack on the colonizer's pride in his language. It is "hidden" because the colonizer's intervention that could have caused this gush of anger is absent.

²¹ See footnote 3.

²² The problem has been evoked in the section "The Need for an Alternative Approach" in this paper.

African conceptual system. The word “autonomous,” for example, has scientific and individualistic connotations (characteristic of the West and the capitalist ideology).

An interesting phenomenon seems to be at work here. The words of the erstwhile colonizers enter Birahima’s discourse, and as the narration progresses, allow for rich dialogic penetration with his own words. In so doing, colonial words throw up a challenge to the African child who engages with them by using them in his own context, thus replying to them. This reply, however, is not directed at colonial words alone but at “words of the other” which sound different, being ideologically opposed. In this way, the dominant language of the colonizer and of his society plays a participative role in his dialogue. In a postcolonial reading, search for the deliberate undermining of dominant colonial discourse hinders this understanding of the functioning of the novel as a whole.

Birahima is the “talking character” in Kourouma’s novel *Allah is Not Obligated* (2007).²³ His ambition is to reach out to a large and diverse audience and he must talk incessantly switching over from one language to the other to be understood. As he says “I want all sorts of different people to read my bullshit: colonial toubabs, Black Nigger African Natives and anyone that can understand French” (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.3).²⁴ Seen from the larger perspective of the author however, we get a good sense of humour tinged with irony in the manner in which Birahima (the narrator), in trying to address both groups (African and Western), educates the “civilized Whites” and “indigenous savages” alike. The explicit use of parenthetical explanations researched from his four dictionaries serves to show in a glaring manner that the White is as “savage” as the indigenous African:

I’m not some cute kid on account of how I’m hunted by the *gnamas* of lots of people. (*Gnamas* is a complicated Black Nigger African Native word that I need to explain so French people can understand. According to the *Glossary*, a *gnama* is the shadow of a person that remains after death. The shadow becomes an immanent malevolent force which stalks anyone who has killed an innocent victim) (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.4).²⁵

²³ See footnote 3.

²⁴ See footnote 3.

²⁵ See footnote 3.

So that's me- six points, no more no less, with my cheeky foul-mouthed attitude thrown in for good treasure. (Actually you don't say 'for good treasure', you say 'for good measure'. I need to explain 'for good measure' for Black Nigger African Natives who don't know nothing about anything. According to *Larousse*, it means extra, on top of everything else (KOUROUMA, 2007, pp.4-5).²⁶

Dialogic Tensions between Socio-ideological Points of View

If Birahima's recourse to colonial vocabulary is often interpreted as having to do with subverting imperial authority, his antagonism towards his own community is a point of contention, as the following utterance seems to suggest:

Gio is the language of the Black Nigger African Natives in these parts, it's a patois. Malinkés call them bushmen, savages, cannibals on account of they don't speak Malinké *like us* and they're not Muslim *like us*. In *our big bubus* the Malinkés look like they're kind and friendly but really *we're racist bastards* (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.54, emphasis mine).²⁷

The apparent contradiction created by Birahima's affiliation to the Malinke community conveyed by the words "like us," "our" followed by a negative evaluation of his Malinke community ("we're racist bastards") has led critics to question his ethnic and religious affiliations to the extent of calling Birahima an iconoclast (BORGOMANO, 2004, p.137). Critics also suspect the voice of the author behind Birahima's categorical and forceful denunciation of his own people (Kourouma is of Malinke origin).

A dialogic orientation towards the utterance unveils a subtle interplay of languages. The evaluation of the Gio tribe intersects in Birahima's consciousness with an evaluation of the Malinke tribe. But this inter-ethnic hostility between tribes is expressed by bringing in the words of the colonizer. By the introduction of colonial vocabulary into Birahima's

²⁶ See footnote 3.

²⁷ See footnote 3.

utterance as someone else's semantic position "words of the other," dialogic relations are established between the "other" and Birahima's own voice in a hybrid formation.²⁸

Let us listen to the utterance intently. In the first part of the hybrid utterance, the evaluation of the Gio tribe rendered in colonial derogatory language "bushmen," "savages," "cannibals" is completed by Birahima's words "on account of they don't speak Malinke like us and they're not Muslim like us." Seen from the larger perspective of the author, the coloniser's inhuman vocabulary (savages, cannibals) that relegates man to the level of animals is ridiculed by Birahima's innocent attribution of a petty reason for the same, a difference of language and religion. Similarly, Birahima's words "in our big *bubus*" lend a funny accent to the racist colonial evaluation of the Malinke tribe "racist bastards" and renders baseless the denigration of the African by the colonizer on the basis of physical appearance.

The interplay of languages in Birahima's utterance, seen above, does not permit a superficial inference of Birahima's voice to be the unmediated opinion of the author. Rather, the author's opinion is refracted in the particular accentuation and intonation he gives to colonial racist discourse alongside the characteristic expression of the child-narrator. By moving the colonial word from one context to another (from colonial hostility to inter-ethnic hostility in this case) in Kourouma's aesthetic creation, the author animates a dialogic encounter between the colonial and postcolonial world, so that the baseless denunciation of man on grounds of language, religion and physical appearance in both the historical periods stands exposed.

Negotiating with Dominant Discourses

Birahima is constantly provoked by the ideological and religious discourses of his society. He reacts to them, talking all the while to resolve their inherent contradiction, and it is their intersection in his consciousness that makes his speech dialogic. Birahima recalls, for

²⁸ If the utterance is taken to be the voice of a single speaker in a logico-semantic relation, there seems to be a contradiction. The contradiction is resolved when two distinct voices, being two different semantic positions, are heard from within the same utterance. Bakhtin calls it a hybrid utterance (BAKHTIN, 1986b, pp.358-359).

instance, some of the discourses of his early childhood within the confines of the conservative religious family to which he belonged. When his mother suffered from a malignant ulcer in her leg, his grandmother consoled her with the following words:

Allah created each one of us and decided our fate, the colour of our eyes, our height and our sufferings. You were born with pain from your ulcer... You should pray *Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!* (Allah is great!) Allah does not mete out suffering without cause. He makes you suffer here on earth to purify you so that one day he can grant you paradise and eternal happiness (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.9).²⁹

These discourses remain in Birahima's consciousness as isolated "authoritarian" discourses on Allah, beyond any questioning. One of the tenets of the Muslim faith proclaimed that Allah's 'ultimate judgment' prevailed and that all humans were at his mercy. But when his mother passes away and everybody is pleased that it was in keeping with Allah's will, Birahima juxtaposes his point of view alongside his grandmother's to mark his objection:

My grandmother explained that maman had been killed by Allah with just the ulcer and all the tears she was always crying. *Because Allah up in heaven can do whatever he likes; he doesn't have to be fair about what he does here on earth* (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.21, emphasis mine).³⁰

In another dialogic instance, Birahima puts to test the truth of a Muslim belief on his journey to Liberia to find his aunt. Before they embark on the journey, Yacouba, the sorcerer, assures him that they would not know starvation as "Allah never leaves a mouth he has created without subsistence." In the beginning they find ample supplies but with passing days food gets more and more scarce. Nevertheless, Birahima is constantly provoked by Yacouba's belief and places it in different contexts as the utterances below show (in the limitation of space here, only 4 utterances have been reproduced). With each repetition, a new layer of meaning gets added gradually modifying its original significance:

²⁹ See footnote 3.

³⁰ See footnote 3.

1. We were optimistic and strong because Allah in his infinite goodness never leaves a mouth he has created without subsistence (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.42).³¹

2. With all the hash,³² we got hungrier and hungrier... So we ate all the fruit that we could find and after that ate roots and after that leaves. And even after all that Yacouba still said Allah in his infinite goodness never leaves empty a mouth he has created (KOUROUMA, 2007, pp.81-82).³³

3. There were kid goats wandering around too. We slaughtered them and roasted them too. We took anything worth eating. Allah never leaves empty a mouth he has created (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.88).³⁴

4. We stole food, we pilfered food. Pilfering food isn't stealing because Allah, *Allah in his inordinate goodness*, never intended to leave empty *for two whole days* a mouth he created (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.129, emphasis mine).³⁵

In the first utterance, Birahima's words are absolutely in agreement with the Muslim belief. In utterance 2, we find the trace of struggle and a deviation from the belief marked by his words "even after all that." In utterance 3, Birahima's desperation conveyed by the words "anything worth eating," set alongside the Muslim belief, casts a shadow of doubt on the efficacy of the belief. The last utterance (4) is the most ironic by its irrationality "pilfering food isn't stealing," and the intonation given to the words "in his inordinate goodness" and "for two whole days," which seems like intrusions to Birahima's voice, is suggestive of authorial participation.

In this way, Birahima tries to enter into dialogue with the authoritative voice of religion. The title he accords to his story "Allah is not obliged to be fair about all the things he does here on earth" is dialogically constructed and contains his reaction to Islam in the form of a negation to the Muslim faith that everything is in keeping with Allah's will.

In Kourouma's artistic creation, Birahima is particularly prolix when he talks about Christian missionaries and African dictators. Marked by repetitions, as the instance below

³¹ See footnote 3.

³² The informal form "hash" is used in Frank Wynne's translation to mean "hashish," an illegal drug obtained from the hemp plant which is smoked or chewed.

³³ See footnote 3.

³⁴ See footnote 3.

³⁵ See footnote 3.

shows, this discourse is either dismissed as redundant or considered a style-shaping feature of the African oral tradition.³⁶ However, the narrative gains in complexity as voice and value-systems of the child and adult cohabit the same territory.³⁷

The fact that Marie-Béatrice's convent school managed to withstand the looters for four months was extraordinary. It was a *miracle*. Feeding fifty people for four months in looted, deserted Monrovia was extraordinary. It was a *miracle*. Everything Marie-Béatrice had managed to do in the four months under siege was extraordinary. It was a *miracle*. Marie-Béatrice had performed *miraculous feat*. She was a *saint: saint Marie-Béatrice*. In spite of what everyone says about Allah never leaving empty a mouth he has created, everyone was speechless and everyone said Marie-Béatrice was a *genuine saint* for having fed so many people for four months. We don't need to get into an argument, we'll just call her what everyone else called her: *saint Marie-Béatrice. A genuine saint. A saint with a cornet and a AK-47! Gnamokodé!* (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.137, emphasis mine).³⁸

The dialogism begins much ahead of the extract quoted above. When Birahima describes Marie Béatrice, head of the convent school, as making love “like every woman in the universe” (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.134),³⁹ a second voice intrudes into the narration, defending the exceptional prowess of the Christian nun in protecting the convent from looters (KOUROUMA, 2007, p.135).⁴⁰ This second voice can be distinguished from Birahima's voice by a change of tone and vocabulary and explains the inconsistency of the child voice, a concern raised by critics. A confrontation of languages and ideologies follows which account for Birahima's repetition of the words of the second voice “miracle” and “saint” to fit them into his own context, as he sees them. Birahima then brings in common opinion as attested by the words “*everyone* was speechless and *everyone* said Marie-Béatrice was a *genuine saint*” (emphasis mine). His tension-filled negotiation with other voices is evident when he says “we don't need to get into an argument.” The posing of two languages in a final contradiction is unexpected: “A genuine saint. A saint with a cornet and a AK-47!” The first

³⁶ See Lajri Nadra, Construction(s), déconstruction(s) dans l'œuvre d'Ahmadou Kourouma in *L'imaginaire d'Ahmadou Kourouma* (OUÉDRAOGO, 2010, pp.87-109).

³⁷ The problem has been evoked under the subtitle of this paper “The need for an alternative approach.”

³⁸ See footnote 3.

³⁹ See footnote 3.

⁴⁰ See footnote 3.

evaluation belongs to common opinion alongside which Birahima skillfully places his own, which, by the incompatibility of the words “cornet” and “AK-47,” gives his evaluation a profane accent. Once again the juxtaposition of two opinions with drastically opposed accents sacred and profane, results in the dialogic unmasking of hypocrisy of the nun in a dialogue with other voices.

The utterance is further complicated by the dialogic penetration of the Muslim belief (here futile) “*in spite of* what everyone says about Allah never leaving empty a mouth he has created” (emphasis mine) alongside the so-called Christian miracle (equally unfounded as unmasked by Birahima’s voice) gives the utterance a bitterly sarcastic tone.

Conclusion

In defining the novel as a dialogic genre, Bakhtin provides us with a very useful tool for understanding the artistic use of social discourses by novelists. The need for this study arises from an inadequacy of methods to explain certain aspects of Ahmadou Kourouma’s Francophone novels and a possibility of supplementing stereotypic notions of the Francophone African literature as seen from the perspective of the Western canon. The Bakhtinian reading of Ahmadou Kourouma’s novel *Allah is not obliged*, which I have attempted in a small way, places Kourouma’s postcolonial novel in a wider frame beyond accepted binarist conventions, besides helping to explain the problems of voice and value systems unresolved by critics.

The dialogic study helps to understand the digressive self-narrative from an altogether different perspective by virtue of a sensitivity to the “speaking person.” Birahima’s prolixity gives a clue to the implicit dialogic principle at work in the novel. A careful listening reveals Birahima’s energetic deliberations with a tension-filled web of animated socio-ideological languages and world-views to which he is inevitably drawn and to which he responds. If Birahima were to remain inert and unaware of the discourses and socio-ideological conflicts around him, he would have little to say, and in that case, his speech would be condensed, unambiguous, and uniform.

What then is the artistic form of Kourouma's novel? The artistic form of Kourouma's novel takes shape right from its conception as an orientation towards the words of the "other." However, this orientation is not intended to be a straight forward rejection of accepted norms of society, in the sense of deconstructing problematic discourse formations.⁴¹ Kourouma's art lies in animating live dialogic encounters by moving the word from one context to another, from one mouth to another, facilitating newer dialogic encounters, for, at the root of Birahima's prolixity, is a provocative word that interrupts his narration, making his discourse multi-voiced.

It is in keeping with this artistic design that, in *Allah n'est pas obligé*, the child-soldier assumes the dominating role of instructor of the West and his own people and refers to dictionaries so that he may enter into vigorous discussions with them. Next, Kourouma places the words of the colonizer in the mouth of the African child. To give a kind of authenticity and unity to his work, he arranges for the self-introduction of the child character to prepare the reader to accept the game. Naturally, the words of the colonizer, being inhabited by colonial evaluations of past usage (racist), intersect with Birahima's word in an intentional hybrid. Similarly, Kourouma brings about an intersection of the authoritarian discourse on Allah with the child perspective of the narrator and the Christian ideology. Without understanding Birahima's orientation towards other voices and accents, it is impossible to fully comprehend the novel of Kourouma from the structural principle alone.

With respect to postcolonial studies, the important aspect that the poetics of the dialogic helps to understand is the motive behind the masking and unmasking of discourse as well as the hidden polemic. Birahima's word is so ingrained in the social that his gaze is outward, his speech loud and public. Contrary to some of Dostoevsky's characters who have a private life characterized by interior dialogues, Birahima does not care about creating an impression; he is just his natural self "as rude as a goat's beard" that he calls himself. Moreover, the reading shows that the postcolonial subject is willing to give new meanings to words rather than remaining locked up in the gloomy colonial past, for, as Bakhtin says,

⁴¹ See NADRA, L., Construction(s), déconstruction(s) dans l'œuvre d'Ahmadou Kourouma in *L'imaginaire d'Ahmadou Kourouma* (OUÉDRAOGO, 2010, pp.87-109).

“Even *past* meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all)” (1986a, p.170; emphasis in original).

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