

History, Political Discourse, and Narrative Strategies in the African Novel: Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé*

Paschal B. Kyiiripuo Kyoore

Department of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, Gustavus Adolphus College,
800 West College Avenue, Saint Peter, MN 56082

Introduction

African writing in European languages has evolved over the years, and so have the themes and the narrative strategies. During the colonial era, African writers were mainly concerned with challenging the myths and Euro-centric perceptions often created about Africans by Westerners. They challenged the moral, political, and economic legitimacy of colonialism, and also sought to educate Westerners as well as Africans themselves on African traditions and customs. In the post-independence era, African writers have drawn on recent history for their imagination and have mostly turned to concerns about governance in the post-colonial states. In this study, I attempt to delineate the connection between history, political discourse, and narrative strategies in a recent francophone West African novel. The Ivorian writer Ahmadou Kourouma is one of those authors whose writing focuses on politics among other agendas in Africa. In an earlier study, I argued that Kourouma's *Monnè, outrages et défis* is a historical novel.¹ *Allah n'est pas obligé* is also a historical novel, though not in the conventional sense in which historical novel is defined. In a study on Kourouma's *Monnè, outrages, et défis*, Abiola Irele observed that:

Although not exactly a historical novel in the conventional sense, the fact that the work draws directly upon the actual facts of the history of French colonialism in West Africa for its theme and for its system of allusions makes it particularly interesting for considering the function of narrative in its projection of the historical consciousness in modern African literature.²

In this study, I am interested in how Kourouma uses narrative in his projection of historical consciousness. Irele's assertion is relevant in a reading of *Allah n'est pas obligé*, a novel that is inspired by the recent history of post-colonial states in the West African region. Narrative techniques Kourouma employs in this novel demonstrate how adept he is at using history as raw material for his fictional imagination. As characteristic in his other novels, he draws on oral narrative techniques and manipulates the French language in a manner that is typical of his writing in general.

The rapprochement between history and fiction is the subject of a study by Hayden White.³ According to White,

what distinguishes "historical" from "fictional" stories is first and foremost their content, rather than their form. He goes on to assert that the content of historical stories is real events, events that really happened, rather than imaginary events, events invented by the narrator. White also believes that what this implies is that the form in which historical events present themselves to a prospective narrator is found rather than constructed. What White postulates here is interesting for a reading of Kourouma's novel which is inspired by recent historical events in West Africa. If it is the content rather than the form that distinguishes the "historical" from the "fictional," as White asserts, then what status do we accord to the "fictional" which is inspired by the "historical"? White attempts to answer this question when he postulates that what distinguishes historical fiction from history is not only the marrying of real events with imaginary ones but also the fact that the form in the narrative is constructed by the author.⁴ What makes his theory even more interesting for us is the fact that in constructing the form of his narrative, Kourouma resorts to narrative strategies that deconstruct the dominant discourse in the history that inspires his fictional creation, as I intend to demonstrate in this study. His narrative strategies are also determined by historical time — post-colonial Africa — and cultural codes — African oral narrative forms.

In this study, using theories in historical fiction, I contend that in his novel, Kourouma makes use of historical "causality" the same way a historian does in a historical work. For me, history is not merely about the distant past. Rather, history continues to manifest itself in the present as we see in Kourouma's novel. Yet Kourouma evokes historical personalities in order to lampoon them, and to critique dictatorship and those responsible for the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone respectively. To do this, Kourouma blends history with fiction through an effective use of certain narrative techniques such as humor, proverbs, flashbacks, and the use of a diegetic picaresque-like narrative voice that speaks against injustice on behalf of the voiceless, the subaltern.

Historical Fiction and National Identities

In their introduction to the book on *Identities* that they co-edited, Kwame Appiah and Henry Louis Gates comment that:

Ethnic and national identities operate in the lives of individuals by connecting them with some people, dividing them from others. Such identities are often deeply integral to a person's sense of self, defining an "I" by placing it against a background "we."⁵

I find this contention relevant in my assessment of Kourouma's narrative about national and ethnic identities. The life of the narrator, Birima, is intrinsically linked to that of others he reveals to the reader through his narrative by a kind of "destiny." Yet this "destiny" is forged through the acts of people who try to connect with some while striving to distance themselves from others. Their sense of an "I" and a "we" is defined in terms of ethnic, national, and class identities. It is through the use of history as raw material that Kourouma skillfully creates a fictional story that is so close to the lives and destinies of the peoples of the region, and in the process questions how political discourse shapes people's identities.

Kourouma's novel is about representing the past through fictional discourse. His fiction helps us understand the past but also the present, because people's identities have been affected by events of the recent past. But how do historians and novelists represent the past? According to Hayden White, the past can only be represented in either consciousness or discourse in an "imaginary" way because the past by definition is about events and processes considered to be no longer perceivable.⁶ If what White postulates is plausible, then this is a rapprochement between history and fiction. Both are by this manner of reasoning "imaginary." It also makes it interesting in this light to see how legitimate it is to argue as Paul Veynes does that the novelist can question historical causality.⁷ One way Kourouma questions historical causality is through the discourse he creates around national identities and political discourse.

In this section of the essay, I focus on the importance of ethnic and national identities in the history that serves as raw material for Kourouma's novel. In the section that follows, I will then illustrate what narrative strategies he uses to deconstruct the political discourse that forges the identities of peoples. Kourouma's narrator introduces himself as a "p'tit nègre parce que je parle mal le français"⁸ (a little nigger boy because I speak French badly). This is a subtle allusion to the history of colonizer-colonized relationship and the pejorative manner in which the French refer to Africans who do not speak what is considered standard French. Yet, Kourouma's narrative is not about colonial relationships, but rather about inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts in the West African region. He refers to some African countries as "républiques bananières corrompues de l'Afrique francophone"⁹ (corrupt banana republics of francophone Africa). Several times he alludes specifically to some countries in the same terms. For example, "une république foutue et corrompue comme en Guinée, en Côte d'Ivoire etc. etc."¹⁰

(a damned hopeless and corrupt republic as in Guinea, in Ivory Coast etc.).

Ethnicity is important in the history the novel evokes because it defines people's identities. The narrator introduces himself as a Malinke:

Les Malinkés, c'est ma race à moi. C'est la sorte de nègres noirs africains indigènes qui sont nombreux au nord de la Côte d'Ivoire, en Guinée et dans d'autres républiques bananières et foutues comme Gambie, Sierra Leone et Sénégal là-bas etc.¹¹

[The Malinke are my own ethnic group. They are the kind of nigger black indigenous Africans who are many in northern Ivory Coast, in Guinea and in other banana and damned republics such as Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Senegal over there etc.]

Though the emphasis is not on pre-colonial history, Kourouma attempts to situate recent West African history within the framework of a past in which artificial borders were created. Those borders now share something in common. In the novel, they represent the human tragedy the novel describes. In terms of political identity, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire are well demarcated by political discourse and by official borders, while at the same time emphasizing how they shape ethnic and national identities.

Malinke identity in all the West African countries is defined by the commonality of culture, and not necessarily by the identity of post-colonial nation-states. Indeed, Kourouma's novel is about the tragedy of how identities are defined by who wields power and who has the political power to define people's citizenship, and for that matter their identity. The main characters in the novel constantly find themselves having to define their identity, or to have it defined for them by others who attempt to erase their identity. The only way to survive the mayhem is to constantly identify themselves with the ethnic group that wields power in the country at any specific time in history. They also define their identities at each border crossing, emphasizing, when politically prudent for their own safety, their Malinke origin. Nationality becomes less important than ethnicity in this reshaping of history. Yet the two are intertwined. Also, class, as in the case of the military, is important in this type of political discourse.

Another important factor in recent West African history that inspires Kourouma's novel is the phenomenon of child soldiers.¹² The narrator (Birama) is a child soldier who travels between several countries. His personal adventures during these travels become the motif for portrayal of historical characters and historical events. He tells us that he has killed a lot of people in Liberia and Sierra Leone where he was a child soldier. He is haunted by the ghosts ("gnamas") of his numerous victims. Political discourse has

made a street child such as Birama an important agent in the civil wars in the region. Civil wars reconstruct people's identities and Birama's national identity becomes blurred in his peregrinations across borders in search of means of survival.

The narrator is not an authentic historical figure. Yet the evocation of authentic family and ethnic names emphasizes the importance of these cultural traits in the politics of identity in the region. Birama's family and ethnic identities in a way shape his destiny. At borders, he and the other travelers can only survive the gaze of enemy soldiers as long as they are not identified with the enemy ethnic camp.

Joking relationships among ethnic groups are important in how they define themselves, and the narrator takes advantage of this social reality in his humorous description of some characters:

Les Bambara sont parfois aussi appelés Sobis, Senoufos, Kabiès, etc. Ils étaient nus avant la colonisation. On les appelait les hommes nus.¹³

[The Bambara are sometimes also called Sobis, Senoufos, Kabiès, etc. Before colonization, they were naked. They were called the naked people.]

These joking relations have been maintained throughout the history of the region, and Kourouma appropriates this humor in order to deconstruct the political discourse about national and ethnic identities.

One important characteristic of a historical novel is that it evokes names of people, places, and historical events that are verifiable. In Kourouma's novel, the narrator, Birama, is a fictional character, and so are a lot of the characters such as the military with whom he comes into direct contact. Yet, Kourouma also evokes authentic important political characters in the recent history of the West African region. They are important characters in terms of the role they each played in the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone respectively. For example, Charles Taylor (president of Liberia until rebel forces and the pressure of the international community forced him out of power at the time this study was done) was responsible in many ways for some of the atrocities committed in the Liberian civil war. With the humor that characterizes the whole novel, this is how the narrator describes political figures:

Il y avait au Liberia quatre bandits de grand chemin: Doe, Taylor, Johnson, El Hadji, et d'autres fretins bandits.¹⁴

[In Liberia, there were four highway bandits: Doe, Taylor, Johnson, El Hadji Koroma, and other small fry bandits.]

The narrator evokes not only historical personalities but also authentic political groups such as the National Patri-

otic Front of Liberia: "NPFL est le mouvement du bandit Taylor qui sème la terreur dans la région"¹⁵ (NPFL is the movement of the bandit Taylor who spreads terror in the region). When he evokes the name of another political group and its association with Samuel Doe, this is how he describes it:

UNIMO (United Liberian Movement) ou Mouvement de l'Unité Libérienne, c'est la bande des loyalistes, les héritiers du bandit de grand chemin, le président-dictateur Samuel Doe qui fut dépecé. Il fut dépecé un après-midi brumeux dans Monrovia le terrible, capitale de la République de Libéria indépendante depuis 1860. Walahé (au nom d'Allah)!¹⁶

[UNIMO (United Liberian Movement) is the band of the loyalists, the inheritors of the high-way bandit, the president-dictator Samuel Doe who was dismembered. He was dismembered one foggy afternoon in terrible Monrovia, capital of the Republic of Liberia independent since 1860. Walahé (in the name of Allah!)]

The violence in the text is metaphoric of the violence that permeates the history that serves as raw material for the novel. The death of Doe itself was documented in a videotape that was circulated around the world, emphasizing the senselessness and the inhumanity in dictatorship, military intervention, and their attendant consequences. This video that was created by the perpetrators in order to document their own inhuman act becomes part of historical documentation. It is interpreted differently in different communities around the world outside the context in which it was produced. In a way, it provides evidence for a criticism of the regime that replaced Samuel Doe's. The video serves as a testimony for why most African countries need political reforms so badly. Neither Samuel Doe's dictatorial regime nor that of the ones that overthrew his government had any political or moral legitimacy to rule over Liberians. By evoking this history, Kourouma questions historical causality.

The novel deplores the different forms of ethnic violence. Samuel Doe, a Krahn, and Thomas Quionpka, a Gyo, who belong to the largest ethnic groups, kill all the Afro-American senators and then massacre their family members. Identity is defined by ethnicity and class, and sometimes identities are defined by suppressing the identities of others, as we see in the massacres.

Doe makes mockery of democracy when he quits the army to be elected as a civilian president. Kourouma evokes this tragic history with his characteristic humor:

Et la constitution fut un dimanche matin votée à 99,99% des votants. A 99,99% parce que 100% ca faisait pas très sérieux. Ca faisait *ouya-ouya*.¹⁷

[And the constitution was approved one Sunday morning by a vote of 99.99%. A 99.99% vote because 100% did not look very serious. It was *ouya-ouya*.]

In many ways, Kourouma's language is a subversive one. The narrator is a child soldier. Yet obviously the author manipulates his language and speaks about politics with an intellectual maturity that is not possible in a person of the age of the narrator. But the strategy is to use humor to subvert the discourse of political figures such as Doe.

In this tragic story of civil war in Liberia, Kourouma is very critical of the international community too. This is particularly the case in the description of how Doe was killed at a time ECOMOG seemed to be in control of things in the Liberian capital. The choice that the historical novelist (just like the historian) makes as to what to narrate is a subjective one. The choice of events that inspire Kourouma's fiction is clearly a strategy to have an impact on the psyche of the reader. The violent language in the narrative is an ideological choice that Kourouma makes.

In the second part of the novel, the narrator takes us to neighboring Sierra Leone where the same drama of civil war plays out, again with the use of child soldiers as was the case in Liberia. For Kourouma the novelist, the tragedies that played out in the recent history of the two countries are interconnected. It is an indictment of ethnic and national politics in the West African region. These are the civil wars that have redefined the identity of millions of people in the region. And it is not fortuitous that the same child soldier narrator takes us across the border to reveal the tragic history of Sierra Leone. The international community has tried to interpret this recent history, and so it is not a coincidence that recently Charles Taylor was indicted by an international court of justice in Sierra Leone for crimes against humanity for his role in the civil war that happened in that country.

The narrator describes Sierra Leone as a "bordel" (bloody hell):

La Sierra Leone c'est le bordel, oui, le bordel au carré. On dit qu'un pays est le bordel au simple quand des bandits de grand chemin se partagent le pays comme au Liberia.¹⁸

[Sierra Leone is the bloody hell. Yes, the squared bloody hell. We say that a country is simply the bloody hell when highway bandits divide the country among themselves like in Liberia.]

"Bandits" is a humorous term that becomes a refrain in the entire narrative to aptly describe a tragic history.

The tragic history of Sierra Leone is also about the suppressed discourse of the subaltern. As in Liberia, identity is defined by who wields political power:

En Sierra Leone, étaient dans la danse l'association des chasseurs, le Kamajor, et le démocrate Kabbah, en plus des bandits Foday Sankoh, Johnny Koroma, et certains fretins de bandits. C'est pourquoi on dit qu'en Sierra Leone règne plus que le bordel, règne le bordel au carré.¹⁹

[In Sierra Leone, the hunters association, the Kamajor, and the democrat Kabbah, as well as the bandits Foday Sankoh, Johnny Koroma, and certain small fry bandits were in the dance. That is why it is said that in Sierra Leone there is more than the bloody hell, there is the squared bloody hell.]

The narrator tells us Sierra Leone used to be a haven of peace, then goes on to recall how the first president, Milton Margai, favored members of his own ethnic group. This is aptly portrayed in a proverb: "Ca, c'était normal, on suit l'éléphant dans la brousse pour ne pas être mouillé par la rose"²⁰ (that was normal; one follows an elephant in the bush in order not to be wetted by the dew). The history of the civil war in Sierra Leone is one of betrayal of what I would call the "petit peuple" (the powerless ordinary people). And Kourouma suggests that this was done "avec la complicité du bandit Taylor de ce pays [le Liberia]" (with the complicity of Taylor the bandit of that country [Liberia]). Yet the betrayal of the people in this history was accentuated by the dubious nature of the intervention of the international community, Houphouët Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire being the target of Kourouma's most invective diatribe. There are other heads of state of the region who are also targets of Kourouma's sarcasm: Abacha of Nigeria, and Eyadema of Togo for example:

On fait appel au nouveau sage de l'Afrique, au nouveau doyen d'âge des dictateurs africains, le dictateur Eyadema. Le vieux dictateur Houphouët-Boigny qui, depuis des lustres, remplissait ce rôle a cassé la pipe entre temps.²¹

[They appeal to the new sage of Africa, the new most senior member of the African dictators, the dictator Eyadema. The old dictator Houphouët-Boigny who, for a long time played this role, has in the meantime kicked the bucket.]

In narrating the story of the civil war, Kourouma recalls how victims' arms were cut off. The narrator alludes to this tragedy when he recounts how the fictional character Tieffi "a voulu nous envoyer dans l'abattoir; c'est le coin où on coupait les mains et les bras des citoyens sierra-leonais pour les empêcher de voter"²² (wanted to send us to the slaughterhouse. That was where they cut the hands and the arms of Sierra Leonean citizens in order to prevent them

from voting). This inhuman act is a very symbolic way of terrifying the population into accepting a government imposed on them. It is an attempt to deny them of the will to exercise their democratic rights. The narrator identifies five groups involved in the armed conflict in Sierra Leone, and as in the case of Liberia, the natural resources of the country become paradoxically the symbol of the armed conflict as the different factions fight for control of the diamond and gold regions.

Thus, Kourouma's novel is a fictional documentation of a history of human tragedy, and the historical figures who take on fictional roles in the novel only demonstrate Paul Veynes' assertion that history is a true novel and that the conception that history makes of historical "causality" is exactly the same that a novelist makes of causality in his or her novel.²³ Kourouma evokes historical figures in order to lampoon them, to make them an object of mockery in order to emphasize the human consequences of the irresponsible acts of politicians. The privilege of fiction is that the writer can manipulate history and question historical causality.

According to Hayden White, the story told in a historical narrative is a mimesis of the story lived in some region of historical reality, and insofar as it is an accurate imitation, it is considered a truthful account thereof.²⁴ This theory is helpful in understanding how Kourouma uses historical figures and how his fiction can be deemed a mimesis of the story lived in the West African region.

Narrative Strategies

In this section, I attempt to illustrate the relationship between political discourse and the narrative strategies that Kourouma employs in his novel. In a study I did on Kourouma's *Monnè, outrages et défis*, I argued that using the language of the former colonizer, Kourouma "translates knowing into telling" as Hayden White terms it in his study of narrative already alluded to above.²⁵ This is what Kourouma also does in *Allah n'est pas obligé*. White has argued that "the functional model of discourse relegates different kinds of discourse to the status of 'codes' in which different kinds of 'messages' can be cast and transmitted with a communicative, expressive, or conative aim in view."²⁶ He goes on to posit that these aims are not mutually exclusive for every discourse has aspects of all three functions, and that this is the case for "factual" as well as "fictional" discourse. The discourse in Kourouma's novel is embedded with "codes" which have ideological "messages." The close reading of the language employed by Kourouma that I will do in this section is an attempt to decode the messages in his historical fiction, and also to delineate the importance of this language in the political discourse that the novel creates.

The narrative in Kourouma's novel is characterized by the use of imagery and by symbolism. For example, when the narrator describes the conditions in which girls live under the supervision of Colonel Hadja Gabrielle Aminata, the environment is metaphoric of the physical and mental

condition of the characters. The compound walls, the human corpses, and Aminata's ruthless discipline make the girls collectively an epitome of what war has forced upon the inhabitants of the region, and especially women. Yet there is one narrative strategy which poses a dilemma to me, and that is the role of the female characters. Some of the female characters play a role that is not in consonance with what happened in the conflicts in the West African region. For example, the use of fire arms by female characters wielding some military power in a camp is not the sort of thing that we have seen in the recent history of the region. In a sarcastic way, Kourouma mocks at the politics of exclusion which marginalizes women. In the event of a coup d'état or of civil wars, women are often raped. Rape is sometimes used as a weapon against the opposing camp in a battle for power in which women are not the initiators of the conflicts, but are ultimately the victims of them.

Language is important in historical as well as fictional narrative. According to White:

A narrative account is always a figurative account, an allegory. [Therefore] to leave this figurative element out of consideration in the analysis of a narrative is to miss not only its aspect as allegory but also the performance in language by which a chronicle is transformed into a narrative.²⁷

Kourouma has created an allegory in his narrative through the use of historical figures and events, and through the use of proverbs, humor, sarcasm, and other types of figurative language. Readers familiar with Kourouma's previous novels know that the use of proverbs is a distinctive characteristic of his writing. The use of proverbs does not merely create a local flavor in the narrative. Proverbs are more apt in portraying his characters, and in describing the personality of these characters and the history that they ultimately shape. Proverbs are a communicative strategy, and in African society they are often used as a subversive strategy with an interlocutor.

Associated with the use of proverbs is the use of humor. Proverbs convey humor and sarcasm more effectively than ordinary language. Humor and sarcasm are a very effective language strategy for conveying Kourouma's critique of dictatorial regimes in the West African region. Humor and sarcasm reinforce the metaphor in a proverb. For example, to explain why he should be grateful to Bella the leader, the narrator says that "il faut toujours remercier l'arbre à karité sous lequel on a ramassé beaucoup de bons fruits pendant la bonne saison"²⁸ (you must always thank the shea-tree under which you have picked a lot of good fruits in the good season). To poke fun at insincere Muslims, the narrator says "l'infirmier était musulman et ne pouvait pas mentir"²⁹ (the nurse was a Muslim and could not lie). Using irony he says of the man who takes away the children from his aunt: "A cause des droits de la femme, les deux enfants ont été arrachés à leur mère et confiés à leur père"³⁰ (because of the rights of women, the two children

were seized from their mother and given to their father). Language strategy also explains the Africanization of the French language, which again is very characteristic of Kourouma's writing. It is a subversive strategy. The French language is no longer the exclusive creation of the metropole, but rather a hybrid of French and terms from African languages. Indeed, the whole novel is a metaphor of the deconstruction of the French language.

This leads us to the discussion of one important narrative strategy that Kourouma employs in the novel. The narrator claims that he needs different types of dictionaries in order to be able to narrate his story, because he did not have a good formal education in French. In the first sentence of the novel, he identifies himself as Birama, and later tells us that he is a school drop out. This, he claims, explains why he says of himself: "P'tit nègre parce que je parle mal le français"³¹ (little nigger boy because I speak French badly). This is a narrative strategy on the part of Kourouma. The narrator subverts the formality and the cultural connotations of the French language by recourse to an Africanization of the French language. After all, Birama is supposed to be uneducated, and as such we expect him to have a sub-standard linguistic competence in French. Kourouma also subverts the French language through the use of authentic Malinke proverbs to demonstrate how the French language is inadequate in portraying indigenous African discourse. The narrator uses several dictionaries in order to translate what he calls his "bla bla" and this seemingly authenticates his claim that the reader cannot blame him for a lack of profound knowledge of the French language. Yet it is through the psyche of the semi-illiterate Malinke man that Kourouma uses imagination, marrying the "historical" with the "fictional."

The narrative is interrupted frequently by definitions in parentheses of words and expressions which the narrator assumes his audience might not understand. While these definitions create humor in the language, they also unnecessarily interfere with the flow of the narrative itself. I should say nonetheless that these constant interruptions do not affect the progress of the story itself. What is important is how this humor deconstructs the language of the political figures.

At the end of the novel, we learn how the narrator came about all these dictionaries in his possession. The dictionaries are *Larousse*, and *le Petit Robert* for French, and *l'Inventaire des particularités lexicales du français en Afrique noire*, and *le Harrap's* for pidgin. Varrassouba Diabaté (of the griot caste) is employed as interpreter for the Haut Commissariat aux Réfugiés (High Commission for Refugees) because he knows a lot of languages. He is a Malinke and his family name Diabaté tells us that he is of the griot caste:

Varrassouba Diabaté était intelligent comme tous les gens de sa caste. Il comprenait et parlait plusieurs langues: le français, l'anglais, le pidgin,

le krahn, le gyo et d'autres langues des noirs nègres indigènes sauvages de ce fichu pays du Liberia.³²

[Varrassouba was intelligent like all the people of his caste. He understood and spoke several languages: French, English, pidgin, krahn, gyo, and other languages of the savage indigenous nigger blacks of this damned country, Liberia.]

Varrassouba dies and Sidiki does not know what to do with the dictionaries. So he gives them to Birama the narrator. Birama is going through the four dictionaries when it dawns on him to tell the story of his own life. It is also at this moment that his cousin Dr. Mamadou (who, unlike the narrator, has been successful in school) who is traveling with him in the same car to Abidjan asks him: "Petit Birama, dis-moi, dis-moi tout ce que tu as vu et fait, dis-moi comment tout ça s'est passé"³³ (little Birama, tell me everything; tell me everything you saw and did; tell me how it all happened). Thus, on the prompting of a cousin, the narrator tells a tale of his life, which becomes the motif for recounting the atrocities of the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. This explains why we see the story through the eyes of a child-soldier, and in this first person narrative, there is authorial intervention especially in the commentary on the civil wars in the region. In narrating his story, Birama wants to convince his audience about the cause and effect in that story. He is the narrative voice through which Kourouma speaks about historical causality in West Africa, and his subaltern voice is a subversive one.

Birama's adventures make him a modern version of a picaresque character. His travel through several places in the region allows the fictional narrator to recount the life of child soldiers forced by adults into a life of death and destruction. The picaresque hero in classical European novels (and Lazarillo of the Spanish novel *Lazarillo de Tormes* comes to mind) belongs by definition to the lower class. Also, chance plays an important role in their life. The picaresque hero travels a lot, changes masters, and becomes more hardened with each experience. In many ways, Birama's life recalls that of the picaresque hero. He is not necessarily of a lower caste. Yet, he belongs to the lower class because of his status as an economically and socially exploited child-soldier living in miserable conditions. Also, like the picaresque hero he changes "masters." He finds himself constantly under the command of different military and para-military personnel, and he is obliged to bow to their whims and caprices. It is also significant that like the picaresque hero, he finds ways to survive in extremely difficult and changing situations. His picaresque-like life makes him an omniscient narrator, and through his gaze Kourouma attempts to make a connection between political discourse and the human tragedies that have unfolded in the region in recent times. The story of political dictatorship and violence is not told by the powerful but through the voice of a picaresque hero who serves as the voice of the subaltern.

In reading Kourouma's novel, I see a link between colonial and post-colonial discourse. The relationship between characters in the novel is one that I would compare to the Manichean relationship that according to JanMohammed prevailed between the colonizer and the colonized.³⁴ It is a relationship characterized by a polarization between those that wield political power on the one hand, and the mass of the population on the other. Child soldiers are made pawns in this power struggle between politicians. And so are the women. I have already discussed how ethnicity determines people's identity. Roland Barthes in his writing described how colonial language revealed the mechanisms of European power. It was a language that was meant to intimidate and thus facilitate the control of colonized peoples.³⁵ I appropriate that theory in the context of post-colonial Africa and intimate that the Charles Taylors who are characters in Kourouma's historical novel use only the language of intimidation; and that language reminds one of the colonial order. Only now the colonial order is the language of African dictators and not that of European colonizers. Frantz Fanon had made a prophetic assessment of the national bourgeoisie at the time of African nationalism against colonialism.³⁶ The post-colonial political leader in Kourouma's novel, like the nationalist leaders that Fanon had talked about, is alienated from the mass of the people. No wonder the language Kourouma uses in the novel is symbolic of the discourse of the politicians. Birama, the narrator, needs several dictionaries in order to communicate his "bla bla." His language would otherwise be incomprehensible. It symbolizes how politicians do not communicate well with the people they govern. The use of three dictionaries is also symbolic of the rapport between francophone Africans and France. French is a cultural, economic, and political tool in post-colonial Africa. It represents the unequal nature of the partnership.

It is significant that the narrator identifies each child-soldier by name. Child soldiers were not just a mass of people. For example, Kik was attending school when the civil war broke out. He ran into the bush. "Kik regagna la concession familiale et trouva son père éborgné, son frère éborgné, sa mère et sa soeur violées et les têtes fracassées. Tous ses parents proches et éloignés morts"³⁷ (Kik returned to the family compound and found his father slaughtered, his brother slaughtered, his mother and his sister raped, and their heads smashed into pieces. All his immediate and extended relatives dead). Kik's individual plight represents that of all the victims of the atrocities, and Kourouma shocks the sensibilities of his reader to a breaking point through the use of a language that is violent.

Another narrative device is the constant evocation of Allah, as one does in an oral narrative prayer. The evocation of Allah as a narrative device emphasizes the thematic importance of religion. Kourouma pokes fun at the hypocritical practitioners of both Christianity and Islam. In one instance, sex becomes a metaphor for the atrocities caused by the civil wars. Mother Superior (who had defended her school valiantly against gangsters) makes love profusely

with Prince Johnson, one of the historical characters in the novel. This act is a metaphor that depicts the spiritual and moral depravity of Johnson, and by extension, all the corrupt African politicians.

Kourouma uses flashbacks, and at times the narrator introduces another narrative voice by suggesting that what he recounts was told him by the other characters. If Birama sometimes relies on others in order to tell his story, his role as omniscient narrator is limited, after all. It suggests that historical narrative is subjective and so its authenticity should always be questioned.

Nonetheless, the diegetic narrator controls the narrative. He controls and manipulates the pace of the narrative, and the truth, because all the other narrative voices do not address the reader directly in any significant way. This is much like the hegemonic discourse of the historical characters. They control power and for that matter speech and freedom in the history that is the raw material for Kourouma's novel. Kourouma the novelist is like the praise singer among some West African societies. The praise singer (or *griot*) manipulates and controls the discourse at the time he or she performs in public. The praise singer can make authentic praises, but he or she can also criticize directly or use very ironical and satirical language to lambast the people who are the object of the singing. In this novel, the narrator often sarcastically praises the behavior of brutal dictators and their cohorts, using proverbs that evoke Malinke beliefs and reveal their relationship with nature. This lends credence to my interpretation of Kourouma's role as that of a *griot*; but a *griot* that chants in a foreign language that he has learned to appropriate well to fit his ideological agenda. And that ideological agenda is to use fiction to lay bare the tragedy in human relationship in the West African region (and by extension all of Africa), when that human relationship is hegemonically controlled by the inhuman acts of political dictators and their lieutenants. And that leads me to my conclusion.

Conclusion

In his rapprochement of historical and fictional narrative, White provides us with a very useful tool for understanding what writers such as Kourouma have done in their fictional creation. White has theorized that the transition from the level of fact or event in the discourse to that of narrative can also be described as a "process of transcoding" in which historical events are retransmitted in a literary code.³⁸ What I have attempted to demonstrate in this study is the discursive strategy Kourouma has employed in "transcoding" historical events in a literary code. We have seen how in the process, Kourouma represents how he perceives the relationship between historical causality and people's identities in the West African region. He uses a narrative strategy that deconstructs the language of historical personalities whose exercise of political power has negatively impacted the lives of people in the region. If narrative is a symbolic or symbolizing discursive structure as

White has theorized, then how important is truth in Kourouma's narrative? White has said that the notion of what constitutes a real event turns, not on the distinction between true and false, but rather on the distinction between real and imaginary. One can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less "true" for being imaginary.³⁹ What I can draw from this theory is that Kourouma's discourse in *Allah n'est pas obligé* is not less "true" because he has created an imaginary discourse about real events. For after all, as Frederic Jameson has suggested in a study, narrative is a "socially symbolic act." By its form alone, rather than by the specific "contents" with which it is filled, narrative endows events with meaning.⁴⁰ I would conclude from this study that indeed Kourouma's narrative is a "symbolic act," but I would argue, following the analysis I have done in this study, that it is not by its form alone, but also by its contents that Kourouma's narrative achieves this "symbolic act." This is how I see the connection between political discourse and narrative in Kourouma's historical fiction.

Writers challenge the authority of the status quo, the politicians. They do this by violating the space of hegemonic discourse, deconstructing that discourse, and serving as a voice of the subaltern. This is what makes Kourouma's historical fiction a powerful example of how narrative discourse can be an allegory for questioning historical causality.

Endnotes

1. Paschal Kyoore, *The African and Caribbean Historical Novel in French: A Quest for Identity* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), pp. 101–122.
2. Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 105.
3. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
5. Kwame A. Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr, "Editors' Introduction," in *Identities*, ed. Kwame Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 3.
6. White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 57.
7. Paul Veynes, *Comment on Ecrit l'Histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), pp. 423–24.
8. Ahmadou Kourouma, *Allah n'est pas obligé* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 9.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Amnesty International has documented how child soldiers were used in the civil war in Sierra Leone. See *Sierra Leone: Childhood: A Casualty of Conflicts* (New York: Amnesty International, 31 August 2002).
13. Kourouma, *Allah n'est pas obligé*, p. 22.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
23. Veynes, *Comment on Ecrit l'Histoire*, pp. 423–24.
24. White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 27.
25. Kyoore, *The African and Caribbean Historical Novel in French*, pp. 101–122.
26. White, *The Content of the Form*, pp. 39–40.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
28. Kourouma, *Allah n'est pas obligé*, p. 16.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
34. Abdul JanMohammed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 59–87.
35. Roland Barthes et al, *Littérature et Réalité* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).
36. Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: Maspero, 1961).
37. Kourouma, *Allah n'est pas obligé*, p. 96.
38. White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 47.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 144.