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Kotia-Nima I and *Allah is Not Obligated*

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Comparing Visions and Voices of Child Narrators in *Kotia-Nima I* and *Allah is Not Obligated*

“L’enfant, en Afrique noire, était le Saint. Jusqu’à l’âge de la puberté, il était considéré comme pur, en relation directe avec les forces et les esprits du Bien de la nature [...] Ainsi l’enfant est un espoir” (Hama 1968b: 11).

The theme of childhood marks, in many ways, the beginnings of franco-phone African literature, notably with some aspects of the poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor in “Nuit de sine” (1945) or *Éthiopiennes* (1956)¹ and the narrative by Camara Laye, *L’enfant noir* (1953). To come to terms with their French culture, these assimilated authors decided to ardently reclaim their identity by exalting their ancestors, their values, their art and cultures. The singular stories behind these narratives convey the concept of Negritude in relation to the cross-cultural encounter with Europe. Negritude, defined as “the Black man’s experience” stems from the black art movement of the 1930s and 1940s in France. The term Negritude, as an association of contradictory thoughts, ideas, concepts and themes was created by the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, to convey a certain characteristic, which is common to the thought and behavior of Black people. But it was Senghor (1964: 9) who was most specific in his definition that Negritude is: “the sum of the cultural values of the black world as they are expressed in the life, the institutions and the work of black men.” The concept has led to writings that have stressed a return to the sources, with often insistence on innocence through childhood.

Representations of childhood are not limited to the perspectives of the concept or movement of Negritude. Contemporary novelists such as Amadou

1. “Écoutons la voix des Anciens d’Elissa. Comme nous exilés” (SENGHOR 1990: 14-15). “Je ne sais en quel temps c’était, je confonds toujours l’enfance et l’Eden/Comme je mêle la Mort et la Vie — un pont de douceur les relie” (*ibid.* [1956] 1964: 148-149).

Kourouma, rethink the limits of Negritude by subverting its very foundations and by radically taking a different position in the rendering of childhood experience. His writing about a child soldier challenges and destroys that romantic vision and through this procedure reveals not only the social destruction of African societies, but also the hypocrisy of the adult world.

Earlier nostalgic glances into the past, aimed to a large extent at opening the eyes of Western readers to life in Africa which would dispel negative stereotypes rooted in the early colonial period, contrast sharply with late twentieth and early twenty-first century works by African authors who portray childhood in an entirely different light. The shift from the early paradise to the more recent hell for African children reflects changes not only in the experiences of children and writers but also in the violent events that continue to plague the politics of many African countries whether they are marked by the colonial experience or otherwise. This contrast raises a fundamental question: is the change simply the result of post-colonial conflicts or is there something deeper that explains transformations in the portrayal of childhood through the voice and vision of child-narrators?

A comparison of two exemplars of quite different portraits of childhood, one little known and from the postcolonial era, the other well-known and from the period decades after independence, offers insight into the deepest layers of family dynamics, below that of social changes resulting from the colonial situation, the upheaval of colonialism and postcolonial conflicts. This article explores how Boubou Hama's *Kotia-Nima I* (1968b) and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000)² establish or comment on a kind of hermeneutics of the education and socialization of children, the vital connection between family and community as well as the building of an ethical society.

Boubou Hama, author of *Kotia-Nima I*, was and remains the *jessere dunka* or master griot of Nigerien verbal art even though he was not trained as a griot. Born in 1906 in Fonéko, a village in Western Niger just north of the regional capital Tera, he was president of the parliament of Niger. Besides being an ardent politician, he was also a prominent poet, philosopher, novelist, essayist, dramatist, and historian as well as a dedicated, well-respected intellectual and a member of several scientific and literary organizations. He wrote widely on African cultures, and in particular, on both oral and written literatures. In April 1971, he received the Grand Prix Littéraire de l'Afrique noire for his three-volume autobiography, *Kotia-Nima*. His *Essai d'analyse de l'éducation africaine* (Hama 1968a) won the Senghor Prize for the best work written in the French language by a foreigner outside of

2. For references herein, we shall use the French edition for the first volume of the *Kotia-Nima* and provide our own English translations (HAMA 1968b). As for *Allah n'est pas obligé*, translated in 2007 for Anchor Books by Frank Wynn, this article uses the English edition and the corresponding title henceforth *Allah is Not Obligated* (KOUROUMA 2007).

France. Hama was also very much interested in educating children and he wrote many tales and riddles in collaboration with Andrée Clair. These texts focus on issues of concern to children and how they relate to the world. Though Hama remains on the fringes of today's literary debates and criticism, his works continue to influence the development of Nigerien culture and in a larger sense the francophone literary arena. Hama fell victim to what Bernard Mouralis terms: "[...] a certain finalism which weeds out of literary history certain texts that do not fit in a spatial and temporal frame that has already been defined."³

The first of the three volumes of *Kotia-Nima* was published in 1968. It is a semi-autobiographical novel in which the author reflects on the daily life of a Songhoy-Zarma child by the name of Kotia-Nima, an expression, which translates as "child you have heard" or "child you hear." Kotia-Nima is at home in his surroundings both inside and outside his village of Fonéko in Niger. On a daily basis, the child is exposed to a panorama of Songhoy life through nature's wonders, the mysticism of his people, and their values. The novel is thus an *écriture multiple* focusing on a historical narrative that reveals the language and rhythms of pre-colonial and colonial society. The title "Child you hear" indicates its fundamental orientation. It is a way of opening children's ears to the wonders of their oral traditions, under threat by the invasion of a colonial culture. The book centers on the importance of history and local culture conveyed in a graceful poetic form. The main character's life revolves around family, the relationship with one's native land, and the spread of European institutions and values, which present both an opportunity and a threat for an African child growing up in Niger in the 1920s. At age seven or eight (Hama 1968b: 11), Kotia-Nima is forced by the colonial authority to leave his village of Fonéko for Téra, where he attends the French school. He is then sent to Ouagadougou in today's Burkina Faso and later to Senegal, where he attends the Ecole William Ponty, an institution that trained francophone West African students to serve the colonial government. After his studies there, he returns to Niger, where he becomes a teacher.

Many years of *négritude* writing separate *Kotia-Nima* (1968) and *Allah is Not Obligated* (2000), the story of a twelve-year-old Malinke boy by the name of Birahima who lives with his mother in a village in northern Ivory Coast. She suffers from an ulcer on her leg and eventually dies. After his mother's death, Birahima drops out of school, runs away, and becomes a street child because his grandparents are incapable of taking care of him. They give him to his evasive Aunt Mahon who lives in Sierra Leone. He goes there in the company of Yacouba, a well-traveled Muslim priest and

3. "[...] un certain finalisme, qui écarte de l'histoire littéraire certaines œuvres qui n'entrent pas dans un cadre spatio-temporel défini ainsi tracé" (MOURALIS 1995: 819). All the English translations in this article are mine, including this first one, and will be incorporated in the main body of the article.

healer who is eager to profit from people's naiveté and the war that is raging there in the 1980s and 1990s. After they are robbed and left with no way of surviving, the boy and Yacouba join the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Colonel Papa le bon. Birahima joins the army of children soldiers and becomes bold, self-centered, insensitive, and bloodthirsty, while Yacouba becomes a professional healer. Throughout their miserable odyssey across West Africa, they stumble upon the horrors of wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. They also encounter the instability of that part of Africa in the form of corruption, superstition, and the atrocities resulting from conflicting interests attributed to different ethnic groups.

In *Kotia-Nima I* and *Allah is Not Obligated*, Hama and Kourouma, by writing in different eras and from different historical perspectives, convey an assessment of the issues and dangers facing African children both then and now. They employ the child figure as tied to unprecedented historic events and developments, which give their writings their impetus as literary creations.

Kourouma was born in 1927 in Northern Ivory Coast in the town of Boundiali. He was one of Francophone Africa's well-known and pre-eminent writers whose writings appear in the period that marks the post-independence era of Francophone Africa. He was hailed for *The Suns of Independence* (1981), a resourceful critical work, which exudes Kourouma's unique and sheer mastery and knowledge of Malinke culture. Kourouma is not only known for his artistic creativity, but for the subversive characteristic of his work. Works such as *Monné, Outrages et défis* (1990) and *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998), all put into perspective history and the truth behind that history in post-independent African societies. All his novels are flavored with a multiplicity of images and use of subtleties and nuances from the Malinke world. His storytelling reflects an inventive style combined with literary techniques that are borrowed from the oral tradition. Through his powerful lexicon and register, he uses satire to paint the historical, political and sociological aspects of post-independence African societies, focusing especially on the most vulnerable and voiceless members of those societies: women and children. Kourouma was awarded several prizes for his work among which the Prix de la Francité, the Grand prix littéraire d'Afrique noire and the Prix de la revue, *Études françaises*, for *Les soleils des indépendances*. He also won the Prix des nouveaux droits de l'Homme, the prize awarded by the Association des journalistes francophones des télévisions et radios, and le Grand prix du roman de L'Afrique Noire for *Monnew, Outrages et défis*, as well as the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens and Prix Renaudot, for *Allah n'est pas obligé*.

Hama's novel is an autobiographical text that traces the development of his cultural and personal values in his Fonéko village. It is also a *bildungsroman* that foreshadows a weakening of Africa's culture and the *éclatement* of the family in the wake of French colonization. Hama's novel presents a perception of a child that tends to follow a romantic and general propensity

for linking childhood and nature whereas Kourouma's text is a satirical document that subverts the conventional and dominant discourse during the independence eras and in today's urban settings. Not only does Kourouma alter the story of childhood in Africa, he also changes the language, the space, and the tone of childhood stories.

The two children, Kotia-Nima and Birahima, offer a series of images of their societies, daily lives, customs, beliefs, and myths. As such, the boys are both "child-narrators" who give a voice to their vision of lived experience. However, a first array of differences emerges in their relationship to adults. This difference has an enormous impact on the children's growth and welfare. On one hand, Kotia-Nima lives in a peaceful and secure environment where he absorbs the fundamental values of his people. These values are the foundation upon which children build relationships with adults, and reaffirm social ties with individuals who recognize themselves as the collectivity. It is what binds children to adults and vice versa. On the other hand, Birahima experiences a life of abandonment with a great deal of suffering. Contrary to Kotia-Nima, a lack of social ties drives him down dangerous paths. Birahima's world is gangrenous, polluted and scary. In this situation, childhood adventure is easily transformed into a nightmare that contrasts sharply with the happy life of Kotia-Nima. Indeed, the lack of this childhood experience is what plunges Birahima, the orphan, into the child soldier's nightmarish adventure.⁴

According to Hama, the world as Kotia-Nima knows it is a harmonious society prior to the colonial encounter. The first quotation cited above marks childhood as early paradise; it depicts a child as the object of vision through the essentialist language of Negritude. A child, surrounded by adults, listens to stories, which model and order his life. He is awakened through myths and rhythms that mothers and grandmothers offer their children and grandchildren. They create for him the kingdom in which a child discovers the myths and history of his people. He is also provided with a morality based on subtle distinctions between good and evil, right and

4. For a discussion of the 1980s literary genre of child soldier narratives coinciding with the emergence of this discursive act of enunciation in Kourouma, see DUCOURNAU (2006), for example: "Son style, lié au parti pris narratif de faire parler un enfant, en fait un livre à part. Il participe en outre, dans une certaine mesure, d'un effet de mode. Un créneau éditorial porteur s'est dégagé: celui, valorisant depuis les années quatre-vingt, des Nouvelles écritures africaines et, au sein de celui-ci, toute une production littéraire évoquant le problème des enfants de rue, déscolarisés, souvent devenus enfants-soldats. On peut citer *Sozaboy*, traduit par Petit Minitaire, du Nigérian Ken Saro-Wiwa (1993, 1998), *Johnny chien méchant* (2002) du Congolais Emmanuel Dongala, *L'Aîné des orphelins de Tierno Monemembo* (2000), ou encore *Transit* (2003) du Djiboutien Abdourahman A. Waberi. Kourouma prolonge d'ailleurs cette thématique dans le roman qu'il écrivait à la veille de sa mort, puisqu'il reprend le même héros-narrateur, en traitant cette fois de la guerre civile en Côte-d'Ivoire" (DUCOURNAU 2006: 21).

wrong. It is an education that he would not have been able to escape from, even if he had wanted to, precisely because he is incapable of speaking for himself. Through the voice of the child, myths are re-actualized and accentuated in images. Access to channels of communication of all sorts is structured around Kotia-Nima's village and his family.

Fonéko, for instance, is a village where the individual does not feel left alone. It is a structured space of solidarity where all generations are brought together in order to preserve the traditional ways of living through a pastoral life and oral traditions. The village thus represents a symphony of life, a space of comfort and regeneration. Being present with his parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and neighbors lets Kotia-Nima believe that he is in the center of life, not death. He knew of invasion, violence, hostilities, and wars only through the stories told by his grandmother. They help him to go back to ancestral sources in order to root himself in his culture and thus be better prepared to face the challenges of the future. As Kotia-Nima states:

In the light of this story, Africa appeared to me with its method of teaching, its subtle dialectics that shape man from within, making of him an incarnation of belief which locks him in a myth where he identifies with a subjective reality of life, which, thus becomes tangible to him with an obvious logic.⁵

This is the reason why Kotia-Nima can benefit from values that animate him, values he can share with others, and values that act as a memory that remains a creative process that he can continue to construct.

But although Kotia-Nima enjoys love and security from his family and surroundings, both he and Birahima fall victim to invasion and abuse of some sort. For Kotia-Nima, they come in the form of the District Commissioner of Téra who takes him away from his comfortable life at home to the "foreign" space of Téra. For Birahima, they come from his family and Papa le bon. Both *Kotia-Nima* and *Allah is Not obliged* thus hint at irresponsible and interest-driven adults who either use children for the French assimilation process or for the ethnic and economic debacles that plague Africa.

The gesture of putting their hands on the heads of the children not only infantilizes Kotia-Nima and Birahima, it appropriates their minds in order to use the children for the interests of colonial progress or the plundering of Africa. As the District Commissioner touches Kotia-Nima on the head, the depersonalization (Hama 1968: 43-44) that comes from the intrusion of French culture begins. The Commissioner diffuses his knowledge through

5. "À la lumière de cette histoire, l'Afrique m'apparut avec son mode d'enseignement, sa dialectique subtile qui forge l'homme du dedans, qui en fait l'incarnation d'une croyance, qui l'enferme dans un mythe où il s'identifie à une réalité subjective de la vie, qui devient ainsi tangible pour lui et d'une logique évidente" (HAMA 1968b: 20).

his gesture, thus rendering Kotia-Nima's knowledge impotent. The same depersonalization process is seen when Papa le bon touches Birahima on the head (Kourouma 2007: 52)⁶. Each person of authority appropriates the child for political ends. In the case of Birahima, this includes violence and severe psychological trauma.

One apparent difference between Kotia-Nima and Birahima is that he is trained not to maintain the colonial order, but to destroy life. His education comes not from school but from the corrupted adults who train him to handle a Kalashnikov. That difference between Kotia-Nima and Birahima is thus quite obvious. Unlike Kotia-Nima, Birahima cannot integrate into life, but he is bent on destroying life, a process already set in motion by his mother's ulcer. Thus, what has started as the restricted sphere of innocent children incapable of harm in Hama's text is translated into Kourouma's as corrupted space and obsolete norms. The bit of innocence no longer stands in African societies faced with changes brought about by colonialism and post independence. By featuring a child soldier like Birahima, and from judging the moral tone of *Allah is Not Obligated*, Kourouma seems to imply that the child has a unique perception of the world and that his visions and attitude are no longer drivel. Thus, if Negritude, as a concept, first emerged as a rebellion against the established system of colonialism, and constructs a powerful black identity, Kourouma's main character seems to subvert more complex problems confronted by African societies. Birahima's narrative reflects the author's direct use of children to transcend the most painful, brutal, personal aspect of the genealogy of Negritude.

The Grandmother as a Metaphor of Transition

Familial space is one of the most important places for a child to develop mental and psychological balance and well-being. It is a place of familiarity with people in whom the child recognizes him/herself and where concepts start to have meaning. Therefore, it is one of the early places that determine life and construct identity. In both novels the grandmothers play an influential role in the lives of the children. And for one to understand the children's stories, one has to know the story behind their stories. It is important to know who their grandmothers were. In Kotia-Nima's universe, daily life means appreciating and/or fearing nature in all its grandeur, completeness, might, beauty, aggressiveness, and complexity. Both the village and the outskirts provide comfort and education. They also provide a certain freedom of movement, and this is seen especially through Kotia-Nima's trips in and outside of the village. Most importantly, there is the spectrum of the teaching and permanence of the grandmother in all these spaces.

6. All English quotations but the last one in French will be from the English translation by Frank Wynn, see KOUROUMA (2007).

So when it was time for him to leave his village for the French school, he experiences confusion and a distancing between his identity and the culture and symbolism of his grandmother.

While Birahima drops out of school, not because he is not intelligent, but because of the incapacity and death of his mother and the threat of war, Kotia-Nima goes to school in order to become eventually a teacher. He will come back to recapture memories of his childhood especially the teachings of Dibilo, his grandmother, in formal French. It is clear that Kotia-Nima's contact with his grandmother created sameness and endowed him with a memory. As Ricœur (2000: 105) puts it, "in the matter of personal identity, sameness equals memory." Contact with the grandmother endows Kotia-Nima with a sense of honor and restraint, two sentiments that are at the core of Songhay education and ethics. Her presence also provides him with a climate of affection, the richness of his culture, the major moments of his history, and the values of his people:

My grand-mother, through her fables and tales taught me and made me conscious of the beneficial influence of politeness, the harmful influence of rudeness, good and bad, the reward reserved to the docile child and the punishment of the one who disobeys his parents. Thus, [...] maybe without even noticing it, wasn't I already at the crossroads that lead to Goodness and the existence of Evil?⁷

This entire assortment of knowledge and recollections is what gives both the child and the adult a validation of self and a sense of wonder, which is a basis of their lives, and this is what Birahima's experience most lacks. While Kotia-Nima is portrayed as gentle and obedient, Birahima's behavior is atrocious and rebellious. While Kotia-Nima's family provides him with guidance, understanding, and education, Birahima's grandparents strategically push him away and toward *l'existence du Mal*.

The fact that there seems to be a lack of care by the grandparents of Birahima for their sick daughter is in itself a rupture between the child and her parents, and particularly between the grandchild and his grandmother. With this generational rupture, Kourouma, thus seems to dwell on this complicated dilemma created by the absence of the grandmother, the mother, or the extended family in the lives of children and orphans. This representation of Birahima's grandmother signifies something absent—the grandmother of history who provides an experience of a fullness of presence as portrayed in *Kotia-Nima* and other early African texts. Birahima's representation is also a rejection of the romantic figure of the grandmother, of

7. "Par ses fables, par ses contes moraux, ma grand-mère m'apprit, amena mon esprit à reconnaître l'influence bénéfique de la politesse, l'influence néfaste de l'impolitesse, le bien et le mal, la récompense réservée à l'enfant docile et le châtement de celui qui désobéit à ses parents. Ainsi, le plus naturellement du monde, sans peut-être avoir à m'en rendre compte, n'étais-je pas déjà, à la croisée des chemins conduisant à la réalité du Bien et à l'existence du Mal?" (HAMA 1968b: 21).

the ideal “African woman” portrayed by writers such as Hama, Laye and Senghor. The decision to not grant support for Birahima by his grandparents shows the strong notions with how Kourouma’s discourse is designed as heterogeneous. It illuminates the historical violent and disturbing periods that African societies are confronted to, but more importantly it illuminates the futile willfulness of childhood and its attachment to nature. By subverting the figure of the ideal grandmother and mythical universe imagined by Negritude writers, he shows that the concept, while based on political, linguistic and national aspects is still entangled with complex gender issues. He still nonetheless provides no avenue that might replace the rooted generosity of spirit of the grandmother. Instead, he exposes a discourse of an ugly and brutal space into which many Africans, especially children, do not enter the gates of history as subjects, but as objects to be preyed on. Thus, the idealized child of Hama contrasts widely with the violent *Izé Gani* to use the Songhoy-Zarma term, of Kourouma. *Izé Gani* in Songhoy-Zarma literally means the “unripe child,” which extends to an unruly or prodigal child. He sees himself as his own entity as he is also capable of speaking for himself and is keen to moralize. However, the sense in which the Songhoy-Zarma use this term can be expanded to describe a child who is very disrespectful, who would speak when not asked to, and who would meddle in adults’ affairs; it is the other whose behavior threatens the adults.

The term also refers to a child who does not hear. This aspect of *not hearing*, once referenced through the title *Kotia-Nima* as “child you hear” puts the two children on different paths. Birahima recognizes all the above epithets, which characterize him as an *Izé Gani* in the following passage:

Number three... I’m disrespectful, I’m rude as a goat’s beard and I swear like a bastard. I don’t swear like the civilized... I use Malinke swear words like fafaro! (my father’s cock-or your father’s or somebody’s father’s), gnamokodé! (bastard), wallahe! (I swear by Allah)... and I talk too much. Polite kids are supposed to listen, ... and they don’t chatter like a mynah bird in a fig tree... (Kourouma 2007: 2-3).

Even though Birahima has grown without an awareness of proper speech based on the sensibilities, warmth, and creativity of his mother, he becomes a versatile storyteller in his own right by manipulating history, politics, and culture, and by exposing the complexities of sexuality, the horrors of wars, and the weight and ambiguities of ethnicity. As a neglected and later orphan child, Birahima is at the cross-roads of a rapidly changing economic, political and social shift, hence making him a literary figure whose life is not at the center of politicians and policy-makers. One of the reasons therefore why he ended up in this horrific situation is because irresponsible adults altered his life by not supporting him and taking charge of him. In this post independence environment, the child’s identity has shifted from the innocent to the abandoned child who is forced to fend for himself in a growing material world. This riveting drama of lost innocence stands with great

poignancy against the vanity of the world. What distinguishes Kourouma from Hama is a high sense of justice because his novel deals more profoundly with right or wrong.

The grandmother and the dead ancestor are the most iconic representations of history, memory and spiritual power for Kotia-Nima. By calling them back—or “*ce*,” which is the female griotte or male griot’s term for bringing back the past to the present—Hama injects an intransience of memory into his narrative and connects Kotia-Nima to the story of his ancestors, thus rooting him in his world.

The discovery of his family memory thus influenced Kotia-Nima to read and write history as fundamental to his understanding of himself and his people. Birahima on the other hand lacks this experience because he has no memory that can give meaning to his past. Rather, the only memory he inherited is pain due to the mother’s ulcer, abandonment, and psychological trauma. Though knowledge and creativity are found in all forms in *Kotia-Nima*, emphasis is put on what is absorbed from a maternal presence and perspective seen through his mother and his grandmother. Hence, it is this memory, that of the women that appears to regulate knowledge and its production. This line of creativity also hints at a matrilineal aspect of Songhoy. It is this knowledge rooted in history in *Kotia-Nima I* that differs sharply from the knowledge promulgated in *Allah is Not obliged*. In *Kotia-Nima*, the presence of both the mother and the grandmother helps the child to deal with trials and tribulations. Unlike Kotia-Nima, who idealizes both his mother and grandmother through a narrative that grounds their names and virtues, Birahima uses few words to describe his situation, especially after his mother’s death. His grandmother does not contribute to his education the way Kotia-Nima’s does:

Sometimes when we would be late in the evening... our sweet grand-mother was really chagrined to see that we neglected her advice. Wouldn’t she often tell us: “Be careful my children, we are not alone on the surface of earth. Nightfall is bad. It is that time which, mean invisible beings chose to come in and go out of the village. So stay then at home! Avoid dangerous encounters!”⁸

Though Kourouma might reject this belief as superstitious, the passage clearly displays a measure of love and care, as well as the anguish of a grandmother who sees the danger that her grandchild might face. She seems to want a relation with Kotia-Nima that is based on dependence and trust, even though evidence shows the imminence of a rupture when he

8. “Parfois, lorsque nous nous attardions, le soir, à l’entrée du village ou dans ses ruelles séparant les concessions, notre bonne grand-mère avait vraiment du chagrin de nous voir négliger ses conseils. Ne nous disait-elle pas souvent: ‘Prenez garde mes enfants, nous ne sommes pas seuls sur le van de la terre. La tombée de la nuit est mauvaise. C’est l’heure que choisissent des êtres, invisibles à vos yeux mais méchants, pour entrer au village ou en sortir. Restez donc à la maison alors! Évitez les rencontres dangereuses!’” (HAMA 1968b: 21).

goes away to the French school. These are aspects lacking in the relationship between Birahima, his mother, and grandmother. Even though Kotia-Nima's grandmother is only referring to internal dangers, she already foreshadows his departure and Birahima's demise almost a century later.

Birahima's grandmother has not deserved the place that Kotia-Nima reserves for his grandmother; she is not as influential as Dibilo of Tera. Kotia-Nima's grandmother held the role of grandmother for much longer than Birahima's, who failed in her role. The power to continue her minimal role is taken away by events because she represents a continuity that is disappearing in the postcolonial societies of Africa. Her role is compromised as she maintains an ambivalent relationship with Birahima. She loves him, but at the same time she wants him to leave due to her incapacity to take care of him, but mostly because Birahima is becoming a serious threat.

Both Birahima's mother and grandmother are emotionally distraught, thus they have difficulty creating a space where he could actually grow up into adulthood. The mother is physically and emotionally incapacitated due to her ulcer, and the grandmother due to the stress that Birahima seems to inflict on her because he is a street child: "My grandmother used to spend days and days looking for me: that's because I was what they call a street child" (Kourouma 2007: 5) and out of school: "[...] because here in Togobala I never went to the French school or even the Qur'anic school [...]" (*ibid.*: 28). But one of the grandmother's main concerns is her grandchild's involvement with Balla, the "*Bambara kaffir*" (*ibid.*: 23), the unbeliever, the different, the threatening "fetishist," a problematic match. She is well aware of the danger that Balla poses for her unruly grandchild. Her fear and concern materialize when Birahima declares that he identifies with the all-powerful man, thus opposing his own family and its values. By identifying with Balla, Birahima challenges the role and influence of the grandmother and weakens the already minimal authority she has over him. Since he did not experience the presence of his mother, he attaches himself to Balla whom he considers his second father who was once closer to the mother in the roles of healer and husband. Given the grim situation in which Birahima finds himself at all times, one can advance that his character moralizes rather than just observe like Kotia-Nima does.

While Kotia-Nima dignifies and magnifies his grandmother by demonstrating that he has observed the core principles she has sought to convey to him, Birahima, on the very first page of his *blablabla* or gibberish provides us with the following statement about a grandmother:

I didn't get very far at school; I gave up in my third year in primary school because everyone says that education's not worth an old grandmother's fart anymore [...] when a thing isn't worth much we say it's not worth an old grandmother's fart, on account of how a fart from a fucked-up granny doesn't hardly make any noise and it doesn't smell really bad (*ibid.*: 22).

Then we saw an old, worn out grandmother (*ibid.*: 41).

Although the first statement refers to a proverb, it suggests the insignificance and worthlessness of the grandmother, especially when she is “fucked-up and scrawny,” terms that connote impotence, frailty, lack of dignity and rejection. The passage is not only a foreshadowing of the collapse of the role of the grandmother in Birahima’s life; it is also an indictment of the teaching of French. One could argue that official *francophonie*, whose goal is the promotion of French and whose funding comes primarily from France represents for Africa the continuation of the process of cultural imperialism begun before the time of Kotia-Nima. Thus, it acts to reduce the effects of *francophonie*. By equating the French school to the grandmother’s farting, the child associates it with a thing of the past, and to a French school that is no longer of any use. More importantly, it is a way of denying the world he is presented with of logic and passion, passion that he was stripped of as a child.

As an *Izé-Gani*, Birahima also exposes the older people around him as *fabulateurs*, *foutus*, or compulsive liars who are reckless and lack focus and dignity, thus equating the elders to the marauding and violent child soldiers. For example, he hints at lies told by his grandmother in an attempt to push him away from Balla so he can join an aunt whose safety at home and abroad is threatened by her abusive, violent and predatory ex-husband and by the wars, respectively. So if he is what he is, he is only mimicking those adults who are his parents and grandparents. His uncanny gibberish is expressed as a generalized rage against a world of nonsense and hypocrisy. Kotia-Nima also discovers lies not from his grandmother but from the very culture that assimilates him:

Kotia-Nima rebelled after examining many horrors. Western thought also had its share of evil shadow. The soldier was not always a missionary. Under his nervous fingers, the musket often crackled. In places where there once were opulent cities, in the cold ashes of past battles, he discovered that the peaceful soul of Africa had been burnt by violence.⁹

Though “*l’âme pacifique de l’Afrique*” may seem exaggerated, suggesting the idealistic or romantic image embedded in the Negritude writings, and though Kotia-Nima seems to be the passive victim of some adults, one may say that both boys seem fully aware of the role and manipulation of those surrounding them. They are also cognizant of the injustice of the adults.

When Birahima proclaims: “I don’t give a shit about modesty, I’m a street kid... I don’t give a fuck about moral standards, I just keep on crying,” (Kourouma 2007: 50) he is rebelling against the *mission civilisatrice* of all

9. “Kotia-Nima se révolta à l’examen de tant d’horreurs. La pensée occidentale, avait donc, elle aussi, son ombre maléfique. Le soldat ne fut pas toujours un missionnaire. Sous ses doigts nerveux. Le mousquet crépita souvent. Là où furent des villes opulentes, dans les cendres refroidies des batailles du passé, il découvrit que la violence avait brûlé l’âme pacifique de l’Afrique” (HAMA 1968b: 114).

those who toy with manners and decency in a hypocritical way. This disorder and instability in adults clearly reveals the nature of the very limited education that Birahima received through his mother and grandmother.

Compared to Kotia-Nima's environment, that of Birahima lacks the affective support and the moral equilibrium that Birahima needs as a child. Instead of preparing her son for life, the mother poisons his life because of her leg ulcer. The ulcer ravages the mother's body, and it wrecks the child's life. Diahara Traoré emphasizes this centrality of the ulcer in Birahima's childhood and life: "The centrality of the ulcer, the epicentre of the childhood and of origins of Birahima, is clear in the narrator's experience as well as in the storytelling."¹⁰ The inability to function as a mother affects the child and the ulcer alters the mother's imagination, dreams, and creativity; she thus stands as a metaphor for an Africa associated with pain and crisis, which impacts everyone especially the children.

Environment, Memory, and Going North to the Sources

Another negative element in Birahima's life is the environment seen in the widest meaning of the term. First, the society in which Birahima evolves is a space of solitude. The child is not encouraged to have a sense of life or to discover the sacred within himself. The mother's house, which is supposed to be a place of positive memory, is a site of pain and filth that does not nurture happiness, mental or physical health. In comparison, Kotia-Nima's home and village are "au cœur de mon univers d'enfant" (Hama 1968: 12) and the center of his childhood universe, his world, is his paradise.

Even before Kotia-Nima goes to French school in Téra, he is able to remember. This remembrance is revealed through his mother and grandmother, who initiated him to speech and thus the magic of the word "hearing," to life and to the process of rationalization. The latter demands a plurality of voices, old and young, heard and experienced in Fonéko and in all the places he has been (at home, in the fields, by the rivers, and on the hills of Dibilo, Baouna-Koi, and Kossorei), but also with his father, uncles, and the priest in order to familiarize himself with sites, landmarks, and religious abodes. These adventures are essential for Kotia-Nima's attitude adjustment and for his initiation into childhood, adulthood, and mankind:

In the fields, with the family, everywhere, among the Sonrai, the philosophy of the "same" is the usual thought that locks the individual in a psychological atmosphere of which, to live happily, the individual must banish hate.¹¹

10. "La centralité de l'ulcère — l'épicentre de l'enfance et des origines de Birahima — est claire dans l'expérience du narrateur aussi bien que dans la narration" (TRAORÉ 2010: 136).

11. "Dans les champs, en famille, partout, chez les Sonrai, la philosophie du 'semblable' est la règle de pensée qui enferme l'être dans une atmosphère psychique de laquelle, pour vivre heureux, l'individu doit bannir la haine" (HAMA 1968b: 100).

This statement hints at the importance of communal and creative knowledge, places where the process of learning behaviors and connecting with one's self occurs. It renders the role they play in the preservation of self and memory and the acquiring of virtues as the society sees or imagines them.

Kourouma's passion for going North, a movement in space, contrasts with Hama's eagerness to return to the sources, a movement in time. North is an escape from the useless past. For Hama, descent into the past benefits the individual; it can also narrow perspectives and fix a child in a world of self-containment. Both approaches are commemorations of memory, but each takes a different perspective. For Hama, as a historian, Fonéko's historical and cultural model is a form of celebration and understanding of self thus the importance of history as a "*culte et culture*" (Hama 1972: 41). At the beginning of *Kotia-Nima*, the particular emphasis on learning history through the grandmother's stories makes *Kotia-Nima*'s knowledge both historical and worthy of knowing. Fonéko's resilience and ability to survive when faced with historical invasions, battles, and hostilities stem from Hama's belief that, in Ricœur's words, "the past once experienced is indestructible" (Ricœur 2000: 445). A memory also makes one believe that the past lives on even when one is faced with potential destruction. This memory manifests itself through the act of "hearing," thus the importance of this in Hama's title. This also hints at a necessity of an interaction of past and future in order to reclaim the Songhoy space. Kourouma's approach rejects this view of memory as being equated to history, since he begins by debunking beliefs and stereotypes through sarcasm and parody. In his works *Les Soleils des indépendances* (1968), *Monnéw: outrages et défis* (1990) and *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998), his characters go through a metaphoric cleansing before heading back to the North in the hope that they will free themselves from a tyrannical history which has been made, told, or written and then handed down by those who hold power. It is in this light that Birahima subverts and rejects ideas and ideologies regarding children, women, ethnicity, conflicts, and wars.

Thus, the experience of memory is important in *Allah is Not Obligated*, because, with or without history, it is Birahima's memories and experience of the wars that will remain with him, not a history that has negatively impacted him, therefore incapable of accurately defining him, especially in the French language. This distrusting of history is apparent in the style of the narrative, which starts with: "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: 1) and ends with almost the same sentence. Against this double reflection of Birahima, Kourouma casts critical doubt on the history presented to him.

For instance, when Dr. Mamadou Doumbia, Birahima's cousin urges him to: "Tell me everything, little Birahima, tell me everything you've seen

and done; tell me how all this happened” (*ibid.*: 215), the author is emphasizing individual experience and memory. This shifts the ideological dynamics of collective experience. Telling the doctor what happened reminds us of Kotia-Nima, “child, you hear.” Instead of a child listening and processing information, it is the adult, the doctor, who is now listening, thus “hearing” the story, not only from Birahima’s perspective, but from the other child soldiers’ as well. It is through a conversation with the adults, and out of the injustice done to the children that they can force themselves into participating in adult matters.

One could be tempted to say that Hama and Kourouma are in fact offering the same idea: preserving and recalling knowledge understood through a Songhoy-Zarma proverb (which could be regional rather than identified with a particular people): “*Sanni ga kaanu binna nda hanga se,*” which translates as “The word is good to the heart and ear.” The proverb highlights a basic human need for stories. Birahima for instance, by recovering and reviving his story, provides a counter-discourse to brutes who lack restraint and the terrorists who continue to offer women and children an ugly universe. And though his story, along with the many others coming from other children, is full of violence, it will endure, spread, and be known at different times by different generations as oral and written stories and histories that will be on the side of the children, the poor and the women. This is emphasized in Birahima’s declaration as follows: “Sit down and listen. And write everything down” (Kourouma 2007: 5). The imperative tense commands power in these words. It exudes character and authority because those children are the ones who earned their authoritative voice by having lived the reality of wars as eyewitnesses and protagonists. Hearing, in this sentence, overrides writing, which is a tool to focus on the richness of the knowledge provided by oral tradition. It is also a way of not criminalizing the victims and avoids turning historical fact into mere narrative to be easily rewritten or discarded.

Telling the story to the doctor immerses Birahima in the horrors of the wars. Both Birahima and the doctor lost Mahan in the war. She is the doctor’s biological mother, and according to Malinke and many African traditions, she is also Birahima’s mother because she is his mother’s sister, a concept that the French language is unable to render in its simple use of “*tante*.” He feels close to the doctor because he has been chasing after the mother he did not have. Thus, speaking to the doctor is a ritual and a remedy for the violence Birahima experienced.

As the doctor listens to his story, he speaks his fears and those of the other children as well. He also no longer feels responsible for his mother’s death because Mahan would later have a decent burial. Being with the doctor therefore provides a threshold. By telling his story, he enters history as a subject who controls his story, his history. Perhaps the story will progressively develop into recovery through healing, thus facilitating his going back

to the North. Speaking the words symbolizes a sharing of his vulnerabilities. For Birahima, it means daring to hope and daring to dream because there is still a dimension within him, which was not wounded: his innocence and faith. This tells us that his identity is not comparable to his biography. It tells us that his spirit is not completely subsumed by his life experience. There is something deeper than his rejection of those who rejected him, something deeper than the role he played in the postcolonial conflicts and violence.

The fact that the sentence “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: 1) is repeated as: “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*” (*ibid.*: 215) at the end of the novel, with a slight restructuring of the tense, inferring that Birahima’s experience must nonetheless remain inscribed in his memory. It may also be a way of forgetting, of repressing the trauma, trivializing it, or empowering it through the repetitions, which recall stylistics of the oral tradition. The presence of the doctor symbolizes a cure, a way of exiting the text and the violence in which Kourouma has imprisoned Birahima. The doctor also helps Birahima move away from the center of the crimes and the trauma toward a transformative homecoming. Birahima does not want to own the pain and trauma of the war. By helping him travel toward Boundiali a city in the North, where, incidentally Kourouma reports he was born, helps him to “*marcher devant soi*” (“to look ahead”).

Children Denied a Childhood

In Kourouma’s novel, childhood is understood not as fixed in a particular body, space or time. There is nothing childlike about his characters. They have their own ways as how to relate to the world, and as stated earlier, they are not victims or objects in the world. In this author’s discourse the child is not the other to adults; he becomes his own adult. He offers a modern, postcolonial child who is daring, as he refuses to face the gaze of adults but offers his own view of the world. Kourouma produces a particularly challenge to the notions of children as simple, naïve, immaculate and innocent. He draws on African belief systems, ethnic divisions and diversions, languages and colonial and anthropological references to build his characters. All of these together undeniably create entanglements, which lead to the wars and their unspeakable violence against children in Liberia and Sierra Leone as well as across Africa.

It is an indication that the children are all profoundly unique in their suffering, their degeneration and perversion. But by mentioning all the other children, Birahima must make himself and the children matter again.

That's why Kourouma gave these children a voice without privileging them, as they are no longer children. The characters introduced in a few unforgettable pages, Captain Kid (pp. 56-59), Sarah (pp. 82-86), Kik (pp. 87-91), Fati (pp. 88-89), Sekou, Sosso (pp. 120-125), Johnny Thunderbolt a.k.a. Jean Bazon (pp. 178-179), Sita (pp. 181-183), Mirta (pp. 183-184), and Siponni the viper (pp. 196-198), are all marginal characters with different but compelling stories who are forced in one way or another to become child-soldiers due to unfortunate circumstances inflicted on them by the adults who failed them. As soon as the reader becomes comfortable with focusing on the adults' cruelty, Birahima brings the reader back to the essential, unforgettable, and heart-wrenching stories of various individuals whose names remind us of different religions, gender, ethnic and class backgrounds. Their deaths, as John Walsh observes, are a way for Birahima to "eulogize the children who die in the battle" (Walsh 2008: 193). It is also a form of remembrance because, in remembrance, they live again.

Birahima is subversive in the language he uses and he exposes secrets that he has heard from the adults, thus exposing their hypocrisy through profanity. Kotia-Nima, on the other hand, innocently believes in secrets that are concealed, is obedient, and does not think outside the parameters of his age.

For an Ethic of Language

Birahima received a scattered language from his mother and grandparents, and his French reflects all levels of the language. Kourouma's colorful use of language explains the accessibility of the novel to many different audiences. Such a dynamic denotes the vivacity and threat of the text to fragment life experience into a before and after the act of reading. Birahima inherits dictionaries from an intelligent griot and interpreter from Togobala by the name of Varrassouba Diabate (Kourouma 2007: 229-231) who speaks many languages. The fact that the griot is a native of Togobala situates the village in the center of the discourse. Providing this information is a way of linking the oral (griot) to the written (dictionary). It is also a way of showing that African texts need not be subjected to the hegemony of the French language, nor need they be trapped in the stream of thought that the imperialistic invasion imposed on the continent.

As a translator, Birahima orients his readers toward a reality, which concerns all human beings. The griot has persuasion and influence like Birahima himself, but the dictionaries are stripped of all persuasion yet they are instructive. Both the griot and the dictionaries provide him with self-knowledge because he is able to tell his story by borrowing from the griot and the dictionaries. They also lead him to the discovery or acceptance of a discourse and a language of his choice that he can call his own. This

new dimension is also what Kotia-Nima finally comes to embrace, using some very familial and somewhat encumbered senghorian¹² terms when he states:

[...] Half through between two continents, between two ways of understanding life, illuminated through a long reasoning, he decided to conciliate the overwhelming sensitivity of Africa and the rigueur of European Cartesian logic.¹³

This “overwhelming sensitivity of Africa” also makes up the substance of the child’s emotional life. The citation is clearly an epistemological reference to Hama’s uncanny reductive view of children. On one hand, Birahima swears so frequently in a vitalistic language by calling himself a bastard, and references to his and even the reader’s father’s genitals become a refrain. The result is that whatever he says loses its poignancy. On the other hand, along with the musicality, rhythm, and abundant imagery of the language in *Allah is Not Obligated*, the repeated formulas not only focus and captivate the attention of the reader, they also create tension and anxiety and inflict a guilt trip on the reader who agonizes over the power of Birahima’s words. His use of language also alters not only French, but also the day-to-day language of everyone around him. Beyond the issue of altering the “normal” use of language is also this radical question: will Birahima’s language now find a place in society? Otherness therefore goes with altering and one can only self-constitute by the negation and/or suppression of the other as the Other.

There is also wordplay throughout the text as it is Kourouma’s habit to use words to show magic not only in the language, but also in the plot and the environment. The language does not merely depict the horrors of the war; it paints the postcolonial dynamics that present Africa as it is today and exposes the apparent hypocrisies of those both on and off the continent who contribute to its plunder.

The potency of Birahima’s imagination in describing the atrocities of the wars on the continent and the predicaments of Africa’s children pathologizes Birahima’s discourse, and exposes his exasperation with history. His words also convey pathos to his readers, young and old. The story of these wars must live to testify to the irresponsibility of the adults and the politicians.

12. In his famous and roundly criticized statement, “*L’émotion est nègre comme la raison hellène*,” [“Emotion is Negro as reason is Greek”], Léopold Sédar Senghor presupposed the primacy of emotion over reason, sealing his construction of so-called black identity. Boubou Hama has obviously been influenced by Senghor’s “supremacy” of emotion over reason.

13. “[...] À mi-chemin entre deux continents, entre deux façons de comprendre la vie, à la lumière d’un long raisonnement, il prit parti de concilier la sensibilité débordante de l’Afrique et la rigueur de la logique cartésienne de l’Europe [...]” (HAMA 1968b: 120).

Birahima's language is acerbic. He dares to imagine his mother in terms that would seem unimaginable even in today's society, except for the *Izé-Gani*. This freedom in language and behavior that Birahima expresses is a threat to society. Thus, when language becomes aggressive, cruel, violent, and pornographic, memory and identity can be affected. Birahima keeps using the Arabic word "*wallahe*," which means "in the name of God," partly because he wants to lend trustworthiness to his story, but also as a criticism of the hypocrisy of those in Islamic Africa who are quick to swear by Allah's name even when the story is not true. Roger Tro Deho (2006: 5), in his article "Formes narratives et anti-formes romanesques dans *Allah n'est pas obligé* d'Ahmadou Kourouma," refers to the use of "*wallahe*" as a "*procédé de crédibilisation du récit*." By invoking Allah's name throughout the story, Birahima adds essence and sacredness to his narrative. Concurrently, he also reveals the banality of using Allah's name because liars use it to convince, abuse, and grab power. It is through these hypocrisies that the intertextuality of *Kotia-Nima I* and *Allah is not obliged* warns us that both potentialities exist, that when children are nurtured or abandoned, they can become either a friend or a foe to themselves and to their communities.

Birahima refuses to re-actualize and ritualize mythologies and myths such as the innocence of childhood or the virtues of rootedness in family and society. All issues combined led him onto his violent path that seems not to have a visible endpoint. However, in the community of child soldiers, he finds a place that makes sense in his life. It is there that he discovers the ability to interact with his environment. Through his suffering, he finds a new way of being and, in the end, he is able to emerge from his moral dilemma, no longer as a child, but as an adult who can fully take control.



By revealing children in fragmented societies, and by focusing their narratives on their personal experiences and visions, Boubou and Kourouma expose several beliefs and values, which render certain archetypes real and others imagined. These archetypes establish a bridge between worlds, even when they seem colored with romantic specificities or loaded with violence, trauma, ritualized initiation and coming of age and forced adulthood. By mentioning countries such as Ivory Coast, Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Gambia, Liberia, Senegal, Niger, America, Congo, Russia, China, Ghana, and France, the problems, explosions, or solutions seem to transcend geographies, genders, histories, linguistic references and identities and social backgrounds. Both children are storytellers whose commanding presence captivates their readers.

Kourouma himself is "*l'enfant de rue sans peur ni reproche*" ("the fearless and blameless street child"), the *Izé-Gani* of African literature and fierce

critic of African politicians, whereas Hama presents Foneko as a place of ample joy, beauty, poetic grace and source of life, a place of integral humanism. Both authors present their perspectives of a real or imagined Africa, by drawing attention to the welfare and plight of children in different societies, time scope and generations; they both provoke curiosity, and they catch attention through the poetic meaning of their work. It is the children, however, as objects of their imagination, who appear trapped in the authors' representations. But at the end of each novel the children, as creatures created by the authors, manage to become "creating creatures" themselves, in the words of Hampâté Bâ. They both position themselves as individuals by taking control of the narrative of history and by providing a fusion of two particularities from which a third one is recognized. Both *Kotia-Nima* and *Birahima* portray at the end of their journey, perspectives of different childhood according to their desire for knowledge, ambitions and experience. *Kotia-Nima I* describes the grandeur of the traditions of the protagonist's village of Foneko prior to colonial invasion and the consequences brought by that invasion. *Allah is Not obliged* presents as much the boldness in character and unremorseful attitude of a character providing an undignified representation of West African societies.

To return to the "fundamental question" we posed initially then: is the change in vision and voice from the child protagonist *Kotia-Nima* to that of *Birahima* simply the result of post-colonial conflicts or is there something deeper that explains the transformation in the portrayal of childhood?

We can suggest that what is more profound is the emergence of the juvenile delinquent narrative voice of unapologetic coming of age in West Africa whereby the discursive rejection of abusive or negligent authority (colonial, paternal, maternal, foreign, indigenous, traditional) is at once a transgressive reiteration through the twisting of language, repeating the cycle of violence, in a post-traumatic expression of reenactment, and a form of vengeful revolt (inverting evangelical forgiveness and humanistic reconciliation) which does overturn the cult, the culture, and inverts the order, subverts and assumes the echo of that illegitimate authoritative voice for oneself. The child-soldier is just that embodiment of abuse and the means with which he assumes it are his speech acts. Relentlessly demystifying Hama, and other Negritude writers and poets concerned with a no longer accessible past and a traumatic colonial legacy, forced Kourouma into a critical perspective and vision that goes against the tide. He has written perceptively of the way Africa must move forward by looking to the present, instead of looking back. Kourouma's works all seek to establish a *parole* and a dialogue meant to outwit and subvert the voice of reason, as war has made that reason absurd ("*Gnamodé (putain de ma mère)!*") as words prove that "nothing more" ties them to the earth. Thus, Kourouma uproots Hama's entrenched genealogies and continuity, as in the latter's trilogy of

reconciliation through attachment of heritage, patrimony and matrimony produced from the “meeting with Europe” through to the “dialogue with the West” (*Kotia-Nima III*). All of Mother Africa’s familial and cultural dynamics to raise children as productive members of the community of family, village, region, and country, foreshadowing the community of nations inherent in this humanistic tradition reaffirmed in the “encounter with Europe” which bridges the quest for enlightened reconnection through a return to African sources.

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ABSTRACT

This essay is a comparative study of two texts that are separated by a generation, which marks a historical shift in the representation of the African child. If there is a dimension that Boubou Hama and Ahmadou Kourouma reveal in *Kotia-Nima I* (1968) and *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000) respectively, it is indeed that of childhood, they diverge considerably in how they stage the main events in the lives of the children. This article proposes to explore and compare the representation of children during the early postcolonial and more recent post-independence periods in West Africa.

RÉSUMÉ

Étude comparée des représentations et des discours des enfants narrateurs dans Kotia-Nima I et dans Allah n'est pas obligé. — Cet essai est une étude comparée de deux textes qui démontrent un changement de paradigme dans la représentation de l'enfant africain selon leur époque et leur génération. Si les auteurs respectifs de *Kotia-Nima I* et *Allah n'est pas obligé*, Boubou Hama et Ahmadou Kourouma, révèlent tous deux une dimension, celle de l'enfance, ils divergent considérablement dans leurs romans quant à la mise en scène des événements principaux de la vie des enfants. Cet article propose d'explorer et de comparer la représentation et l'expérience des enfants dans la période postcoloniale et postindépendance en Afrique de l'Ouest.

Keywords/Mots-clés : West Africa, Malinke, Soghoy-Zarma, children, colonialism, education, Francophone literature, independence, memory, post-colonialism, post-independence, war/Afrique de l'Ouest, Malinké, Soghoi-Zarma, enfants, colonialisme, éducation, littérature francophone, guerre, indépendance, mémoire, postcolonialisme, postindépendance.

