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Orality, trauma theory and interlingual translation: a study of repetition in Ahmadou Kourouma's

Allah n'est pas obligé

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The use of stylistic devices based around repetition in Ahmadou Kourouma's Allah n'est pas obligé is usually taken as one of the markers of the novel's link to oral story-telling traditions. It is however equally feasible to read such devices as markers of trauma, linking them for example to therapeutic story-telling and to the development of inner schemata adequate to the traumatic experience. This article presents a reading of Allah n'est pas obligé that seeks to combine the concepts of translation-of-orality and translation-of-trauma, thus contributing to on-going discussions around the postcolonializing of trauma theory. It also explores the implications of such a reading for postcolonial translation theory, and particularly the theorization of the translation of orality-inflected literature.

Keywords: Kourouma, repetition, orality, trauma, translation, postcolonial

The relevance of oral story-telling traditions to Ahmadou Kourouma's oeuvre has long been acknowledged, not only by a large number of critics, but also by Kourouma himself. For many critics, the simple fact that Kourouma's novels are works of African literature is sufficient to link them to oral traditions, since in their view African European-language literature can be viewed as "a hybrid product which is looking inward into African orature and outward into imported literary traditions" (Zabus 2007, 5). Peter Vakunta (2010, 78), for example, whilst acknowledging the multiplicity of genre and performance styles in the oral tradition, argues that "orality functions as the matrix of African mode [sic] of discourse", and offers an extended analysis of the oral poetics of Kourouma's

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first novel, *Les Soleils des indépendances.* Kourouma himself repeatedly stressed the relevance of *oralité* to his work, both in terms of the overall structures adopted in his novels and in the details of syntax and lexis. In an interview accorded to Jean Ouédraogo, for example, he outlines the specific oral narrative technique adopted in each of his first three novels:

> In *the Suns of Independences* I follow the model of the *palabres.* […] In *Monnew,* we are dealing with an epic, the main protagonist is a king, and in Africa, this domain belongs to the *griot.* Hence my borrowing of the *griot's* technique. With regard to […] *En Attendant le Vote des Bêtes sauvages,* I chose to situate the action in the midst of a hunting society. I am, therefore, using the technique of what we call the hunters' *griot* or *sèrè*. Each time, there was a correlation to the protagonist. (Ouédraogo 2000, 1338-9)

While the link between *Allah n'est pas obligé* and a particular African narrative technique is not as clear in this fourth novel as it is in Kourouma's first three novels – the protagonist is a child and, as the narrator himself acknowledges, children invariably fulfil the role of listener, rather than speaker, in traditional Malinke society –, the fictionalized construction of an oral context for the novel is no less present. It is fully revealed in the final paragraphs of the novel, when the protagonist Birahima is invited to tell his older cousin all that he has seen and done, and Birahima explains that he settled down comfortably and started to "conter [ses] salades" [tell his stories] (Kourouma 2000, 224) "for a couple of days" (Kourouma 2006, 215).[1] His final words turn out to be the opening words of the novel, revealing that the whole tale has been told in response to the cousin's invitation. This fictionalized construct of the text's oral nature is evoked at various points elsewhere in the novel, with Birahima commanding his audience: "sit down and listen" (Kourouma 2006, 12) before launching into the main part of his tale, and declaring at various points that he is too tired, or can't be bothered to say any more "today" (Kourouma 2006, 42). Many of the lexical and syntactic features identified by Kourouma (1997a; 1997b), Gyasi (2006), Bandia (2008), Vakunta (2010) and others as being characteristic of the oralization of written literature and more specifically as being

markers of oral discourse in Kourouma's earlier novels are also present in *Allah n'est pas obligé*: these include direct interaction with the reader, exclamations, ideophones, proverbs, refrains, evocations of the trickster figure (most obviously in Yacouba, Birahima's companion), parallelism and repetition.

In these respects, it is undoubtedly appropriate to view *Allah n'est pas obligé* as an instance of what Bandia terms "intercultural writing as translation", or in other words as an example of "translation from an oral-tradition discourse into a written one" (Bandia 2008, 38). However, it is equally feasible to read Kourouma's novel under another critical paradigm that has drawn on the metaphorical notion of translation, namely that of the translation of trauma, or pain, into writing. This paradigm is developed by Madelaine Hron in connection with representations of immigrant experiences in literature: drawing on Roman Jakobson's (1959) typology, she argues that "pain can be conceived of as a system of signs […] the translation of pain may be deemed to be a form of 'intersemiotic translation'" (Hron 2009, 40). Hron argues that this kind of translation, which she also refers to as a "rhetorics of pain" (48) is "most apparent in the use of language – the grammatical syntax, style, and arsenal of literary techniques" (48). Hron's indicative list of the kinds of techniques associated with a rhetorics of pain shows a clear overlap with many of the stylistic features that are often linked to translations of orality in African writing, and includes "exclamations, rhetorical questions, or repetitive declarative statements […] repetition, fragmentation, or the use of ellipses […] the *epimone*, or frequent repetition of a phrase or question for emphasis." (48-49).

This overlap in what we might term the 'surface features' of translations from two different kinds of source text, or "metatext" (Tymoczko 1999, 24) – orality in the first case, trauma or pain in the second – is undoubtedly relevant to Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé,* telling as it does of a child's experiences in one of the most brutal civil wars of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the fictionalized construction of an oral context for the novel, outlined above, offers a significant impulse for reading the novel as a translation-of-trauma rather than simply as a translation-of-orality, for when Birahima tells the reader to sit down and listen, he follows this with a further

command: "And write everything down" (Kourouma 2006, 5). This command goes some way to explaining the apparent inconsistency in the supposed oral nature of his tale which emerges when Birahima states: "The dictionaries are for looking up big words […] I need to be able to explain stuff because I want all sorts of different people to **read** my bullshit" (Kourouma 2006, 3, my emphasis). This scenario, according to which the tale is not simply an instance of oral story-telling, but more precisely an instance of dictation, evokes the possibility of reading Birahima's story as testimony.[2] This possibility is further supported by Birahima's repeated assertions that what he is saying is true, as well as by the occasional expression of anxiety that he will not be believed.

In this article, I shall first explore the potential for reading *Allah n'est pas obligé* along these lines, working primarily within a trauma theory framework, and focussing in particular on aspects of the text that are characterized by repetition, a stylistic device that, in African fiction at least, has a strong tendency to be interpreted as a marker of oral discourse. In its attempt to theorize an orality-inflected narrativization of trauma, this article may be viewed as a continuation of Craps and Buelens' project which sought to "examine where and how trauma studies can break with Eurocentrism" (Craps & Buelens 2008, 2). In the second part of the article, I shall explore the implications of this "'postcolonializing' [of] trauma studies" (3) for postcolonial translation theory, asking whether reading texts such as *Allah n'est pas obligé* in this way alters our evaluations of the relative success or failure of efforts at interlingual translation of orality-inflected literature.

Trauma Theory

Within the broad body of approaches to the study of trauma that make up the diverse field of trauma studies, it is the "therapeutic current" (Visser 2011, 274) associated most notably with Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) as opposed to the "aporetic current" developing out of the view that trauma is in essence unspeakable, that is most obviously relevant to a reading of *Allah n'est pas obligé.* Birahima is chatty, voluble, or in his own words a child who "talk[s] too much" (Kourouma 2006, 3); his narrative is characterized by an excess of words, rather than a retreat into

silence; and when he consigns an episode to silence he states not that the episode *cannot* be spoken about, but that he does not *wish* to speak about it.[3] This emphasis on control is apparent from the very opening words of the novel, in which Birahima declares: "Je décide le titre définitif et complet de mon blablabla" [I'm deciding the full and definitive title of my blablabla] (Kourouma 2000, 9), and is characteristic of the novel as a whole. His narrative thus tallies with Herman's vision of story-telling as a way of restoring "a sense of efficacy and power", reversing the "helplessness [that] constitutes the essential insult of trauma" (2001, 41). Herman's view of therapeutically successful story-telling as being "an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context" (177) as opposed to a confusion of "frozen imagery and sensation" (175) also ties in with the kind of account presented in *Allah n'est pas obligé,* even if some elements of what Herman would view as earlier, unsuccessful attempts are nevertheless present in Birahima's rendition.

Furthermore, Herman's locating of trauma in the event itself, rather than in the response to an event – a definition preferred by scholars such as Cathy Caruth (1996) – provides a more convincing justification for a trauma theory-based analysis of Birahima's narrative, allowing us to start from the premise that the events described by Birahima, which include "exposure to extreme violence" and "witnessing grotesque death", are among those "certain identifiable experiences" (Herman 2001, 34) that increase the likelihood of psychological trauma. In other words, it is not the identification of a trauma-inflected response that justifies the use of the critical paradigm, but rather the nature of the narrated events themselves and the positing of the narrative as testimony. To some extent, this represents a way out of the conundrum of depending on Eurocentric formulations of textual strategies deemed appropriate for the representation of traumatic experiences – many of which may not be appropriate to African novels whose primary links may be to oral traditions rather than modernist and postmodernist forms – in order to justify the use of the trauma theory paradigm.[4]

According to Herman's model, the transformation of trauma into restorative story-telling can only take place once safety has been established for the trauma survivor. Here, too, there are

resonances with *Allah n'est pas obligé*, even if the kind of safety that Birahima achieves is rather more flimsy than the kind of safety achieved by survivors in Herman's Western model: Birahima is seated in his wealthy cousin's four-wheel drive car, putting ever more physical distance between himself and the war zone; his return to safety is marked not only by the thrice repeated "la route était rectilingue" [the road was straight] (Kourouma 2000, 222-3), but also by the older cousin's tender term of address, "petit Birahima" [little Birahima] (224) and his gentle invitation, "dis-moi, dis-moi" [tell me, tell me] (ibid.).

Other aspects of Herman's theory, which is elaborated primarily in terms of its relevance to psychotherapeutic practice, and includes discussion of survivor-therapist interaction during the story-telling process, are clearly less directly relevant to *Allah n'est pas obligé.* Nevertheless, Herman's paradigm offers a useful framework within which to analyse Birahima's narrative, and in the section that follows, I shall draw on it to propose an alternative trauma-based reading of specific features of the narrative – notably, features involving some element of repetition – that are usually taken as indicative of the underlying orality of Kourouma's work.

Repetition as therapeutic story-telling

Parallelism, and the closely related device of anadiplosis, are frequently taken as markers *par excellence* of oral discourse. Ruth Finnegan (1977, 127), for example, notes that some scholars "unequivocally regard repetition (including parallelism and formulaic expressions) as characteristic of oral literature [and] even the yardstick by which the oral text can definitely be distinguished from written literature". In *Allah n'est pas obligé,* Kourouma makes striking use of parallelism and anadiplosis in Birahima's narrations of particularly traumatic experiences. The first of these concerns Birahima's account of the burning of his arm as a child:

Je suis allé trop vite, trop loin, je ne voulais pas me faire rattraper. J'ai foncé, j'ai

bousculé dans la braise ardente. La braise ardente a fait son travail, elle a grillé mon

bras. Elle a grillé le bras d'un pauvre enfant comme moi parce que Allah n'est pas obligé

d'être juste dans toutes les choses qu'il fait sur terre. (Kourouma 2000, 14-15).[5]

In this passage, Kourouma accumulates parallel syntactic structures in the build-up to the burning (Je

suis allé trop vite… je ne voulais pas…J'ai foncé, j'ai bousculé), and draws on anadiplosis to speak of

the burning event itself (la braise ardente. La braise ardente…. elle a grillé mon bras. Elle a grillé le

bras….). That this event is particularly traumatizing for Birahima is signalled explicitly in his account:

it is the first thing that he thinks to relate about his life story, it continues to dominate his thinking,

in the manner of the "indelible image" (Herman 2001, 38) described by trauma theorists,[6] and he

has a physical reaction, reliving his feelings of pain and fear, when he tells the story.

      Another tale that is narrated by drawing heavily on the devices of parallelism and

anadiplosis is that of one of Birahima's child-soldier friends, Kik. The events that lead to Kik's death

are told as part of the more general narrative of the child-soldiers' journey to the ULIMO camp, and

are then re-told in the context of the funeral oration that Birahima decides to tell for his friend. It is

in this re-telling that repetitive structures dominate, and, as in the story of the burnt arm, parallelism

is used during the build-up, and anadiplosis during the climax:

    Dans le village de Kik, la guerre tribale est arrivée vers dix heures du matin. Les enfants

    étaient à l'école et les parents à la maison. Kik était à l'école et ses parents à la maison.

    Dès les premières rafales, les enfants gagnèrent la forêt. Kik gagna la forêt. Et, tant qu'il

    y eut du bruit dans le village, les enfants restèrent dans la forêt. Kik resta dans la forêt.

    C'est seulement le lendemain matin, quand il n'y eut plus de bruit, que les enfants

    s'aventurèrent vers leur concession familiale. Kik regagna la concession familiale [...] Kik

    est devenu un soldat-enfant. Le soldat-enfant était malin. Le malin small-soldier a pris

    un raccourci. En prenant le raccourci, il a sauté sur une mine. […] Nous l'avons

    abandonné mourant dans un après-midi, dans un foutu village, à la vindicte des

    villageois. A la vindicte populaire parce que c'est comme ça que Allah a voulu que le

pauvre garçon termine sur terre. Et Allah n'est pas obligé, n'a pas besoin d'être juste

dans toutes ses choses, dans toutes ses créations, dans tous ses actes ici-bas.

(Kourouma 2000, 96-7)[7]

In her analysis of *Allah n'est pas obligé*, Annik Docquire Kerszberg (2002, 112) links

anadiplosis with the oral character of the narrative, observing that the same device features heavily

in Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir,* and suggesting that it may be connected specifically with the oral

story-telling traditions of the Malinke people. It is certainly present elsewhere in *Allah n'est pas*

obligé, notably in Birahima's account of Yacouba's life, or in his description of the background to

Prince Johnson's murder of Samuel Doe.[8] While Kerszberg argues that "cette pléthore de répétitions

confère au texte l'apparence de l'oralité de même qu'une fausse simplicité" [this plethora of

repetitions confers on the text the appearance of orality as well as a false simplicity] (113), and

stresses the importance of this false simplicity for the satirical humour of the novel, I would suggest

that the use of these repetitive structures can also be seen as a means for Birahima to tame and gain

mastery over traumatic events, allowing this act of story-telling to function as a therapeutic

narrative of the kind envisaged by Herman. For, by drawing on devices associated with traditional

story-telling structures, or in other words by drawing on the same patterns as those employed for

more ordinary biographies or tales, Birahima is "reconstruct[ing] the traumatic event as a recitation

of fact" (Herman 2001, 177), creating a line of continuity that helps to integrate the traumatic event

into the fuller narrative of his life. The translation of orality and the translation of trauma here work

hand-in-hand, the presence of the oral markers highlighting the degree of success with which the

traumatic memory has been transformed into a coherent narrative.

Repetition as the development of a new schemata

In both of the extracts cited above, Birahima concludes his account by citing the titular leitmotif,

"Allah is not obliged to be fair about all the things he does here on earth" (Kourouma 2006, 1). This

leitmotif, or a variation on it, is cited more than ten times across the novel as a whole, and is joined

by two other leitmotifs that are repeated with comparable levels of frequency: "Allah never leaves empty a mouth he has created" (Kourouma 2006, 35), and "that's the way it is with tribal wars" (Kourouma 2006, 98). Once again, these repetitive devices, which function as refrains, can be viewed as markers of oral discourse, typical as they are of traditional oral tales. Yet when the novel is read within a trauma theory framework, these refrains can also be linked to trauma theory's postulation of a "completion principle" (Horowitz, 1986), summarized by Regal and Joseph (2010, 15) as "an inherent drive to make our mental models coherent with current information". Horowitz's theory is constructed on the premise that our inner schemata will need alteration in order to be made adequate to account for traumatic events, a premise that is echoed in Herman's model when she argues: "Traumatic events […] undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis" (2001, 51). What is striking about the three refrains used by Birahima is that they are *not* subject to overt questioning as a result of the traumatic events experienced by the narrator; if we take them as representative of Birahima's belief system or inner schemata, it would appear that his belief system remains intact, *contra* the theories of trauma developed by Horowitz, Herman and others.[9] The only instance of overt questioning of a belief-system relates to the use of grigris, an essential part of Yacouba's trade but never clearly adopted as part of Birahima's own schemata. Following two events in which failure or success is ascribed to improper or proper use of the grigris, Birahima reflects:

> It was about this time that I realised I didn't understand this fucking universe, I didn't understand a thing about this bloody world, I couldn't make head or tail of people or society […] Was this grigri bullshit true or not true? Who was there who could tell me? Where could I go to find out? Nowhere. Maybe this grigri thing is true… or maybe it's a lie, a scam, a con that runs the whole length and breadth of Africa. *Faforo!* (Kourouma 2006, 118)

This is the only example of questioning within the novel that might obviously fit Herman's (2001, 178) view that "the traumatic event challenges an ordinary person to become a theologian, a philosopher, and a jurist"; elsewhere, Birahima's inner schemata appears to remain largely unchallenged.

One possible explanation for this apparent failure of Birahima's narrative to include a "systematic review of the meaning of the event" (Herman 2001, 178) is that his original belief system was developed in a context in which trauma and pain were already an intrinsic part of life: growing up in his mother's hut surrounded by the intense, unremitting pain and stench of her ulcer, Birahima was forced to develop a worldview that could take account of that undeserved suffering, as well as of his own, and was encouraged in this by his grandmother; "Allah is not obliged to be fair in all his things here below" represents just such a schemata as well as being compatible with popularized Muslim beliefs in an evening-out of suffering between now and the after-life.[10] Such a line of reasoning suggests that tenets of trauma theory that are couched in universalist terms, such as Herman's assertion that "the arbitrary, random quality of her fate defies **the basic human faith** in a just or even predictable world order" (2001, 178, my emphasis), are shown to need modulation in contexts where religious, cultural or political factors mean that the predictability of events and justice on this earth are far from being basic, default assumptions.

While it is certainly true that explicit interrogation of the narrator's inner schemata is almost entirely absent from *Allah n'est pas obligé,* to state that Birahima's belief system undergoes no change as a result of the trauma he experiences would be to ignore the acerbic humour of the novel, as well as the details of the minor modulations that two out of the three leitmotifs undergo. The titular leitmotif, for example, often occurs in conjunction with the repeated swearwords with which Birahima punctuates his narrative, and occasionally even incorporates vulgar language into its own formulation. These vulgarizations undermine the apparent piety of the leitmotif, rendering it less an assertion of faith in the all-powerfulness of Allah than an expression of the narrator's bitterness, frustration and anger at his own lack of control over events. This undermining is confirmed by the

contexts in which the second leitmotif, "Allah never leaves empty a mouth he has created", appears. Apparently an expression of faith in Allah's care for his creatures, these words are cited ironically at times when Birahima and Yacouba are forced to eat tree leaves and roots, steal, or when they have no means of subsistence other than their AK47s.

Another significant way in which the validity of the titular leitmotif is called into question is through the apparent interchangeability of its subject – Allah – for another one. Birahima evokes the titular leitmotif not only with Allah in the subject position, but also with "the spirits of the ancestors" (Kourouma 2006, 13), and "God" (Kourouma 2006, 141). Although the syncretism expressed by these variations of the leitmotif is in some senses nothing more than the reflection of the various belief systems of those around Birahima – the Islam of his Muslim mother and grandmother, the animism of his step-father, the Christianity of Marie-Béatrice and Prince Johnson – its effect is devastating: rather than being a reassuring expression of faith in a higher wisdom or good associated with a specific higher being, the letimotif becomes a terrifying expression of the view that human beings are at the mercy of whatever higher power they chose to believe in. The leitmotif thus does not so much serve to make trauma manageable or comprehensible, as it might first appear, but rather to make trauma infinitely possible. It suggests that, far from representing a schemata adequate to the trauma that he is describing, the first two leitmotifs are in fact an expression of the sense of helplessness that, as argued above, is viewed by trauma theory as lying at the heart of every traumatizing experience.

It is perhaps for this reason that Birahima begins to apply the leitmotif to himself, explicitly shifting from "Allah is not obliged" to "I am not obliged" on a number of occasions. Immediately after the conclusion of the Kik passage cited above, for example, Birahima states: "The same goes for me. I don't have to talk, I'm not obliged to tell you my dog's-life-story, wading through dictionary after dictionary. I'm fed up talking, so I'm going to stop for today. You can all fuck off!" (Kourouma 2006, 91). The titular leitmotif thus gradually becomes a means of justifying Birahima's right to

control over his narrative, and is an important marker of the restoration of power through therapeutic story-telling.

An interesting point that emerges out of this modulation is that while Birahima's role in the conflict is by no means passive – Birahima admits in the opening paragraphs that he has "killed lots of innocent victims" (Kourouma 2006, 4) – at no point in any of the specific conflicts that Birahima describes does he explicitly state that he has killed anyone. Where reprehensible actions are described, Birahima places himself within the role of passive recipient of decisions made by a higher force. One example of this was cited above in relation to the Kik passage: although Kik was abandoned by Birahima and his friends, he was abandoned not because of their decision, but because "that's how Allah decided he wanted poor Kik to end his days on earth" (Kourouma 2006, 91). Another example can be found in Birahima's description of how he got together a band of friends to go out and steal food: "We stole food, we pilfered food. Pilfering food isn't stealing because Allah, Allah in his inordinate goodness, never intended to leave empty for two whole days a mouth he created. *Walahé*!" (Kourouma 2006, 129). Such shifts of blame away from Birahima are also enacted through use of the third leitmotif; when Birahima describes how he and his fellow child-soldier colleagues chase two men, for example, he explains simply: "Nous les avons pris tout de suite en chasse. Parce que c'est la guerre tribale qui veut ça" [We immediately chased after them. Because that's the way it is with tribal wars] (Kourouma 2000, 93). The tribal wars refrain is also evoked when describing various atrocities such as the use of human skulls to mark out the limits of the soldiers' camps, or the systematic torturing of people from other ethnicities, or the equally systematic raping of women by rebel leaders. To some extent, the use of this third refrain could be seen as a new schemata, introduced to account for some of the traumatic experiences that Birahima undergoes – the civil war being in and of itself a sufficient explanation, demarcating an arena in which more usual codes of conduct do not apply. It is undoubtedly also the case, however, that it serves to deflect blame away from Birahima himself, and its usage and repetition thus function to

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highlight contentious issues around the victim versus perpetrator status of child-soldiers and sufferers of trauma.

From inter-semiotic to inter-lingual translation

This reading of *Allah n'est pas obligé* within a trauma theory-based framework raises a number of significant questions when brought alongside interlingual translation practice. Both the English and the German versions of *Allah n'est pas obligé* eliminate or dilute the repetitive patterns based on parallelism and anadiplosis analysed above. The opening of the Kik story, for example, is told in the German version using very little repetition: the sentence "Les enfants étaient à l'école et les parents à la maison" is omitted entirely, and elsewhere the parallels between the children's actions and Kik's are drawn either by simple summarizing phrases ("Kik war unter ihnen"; "Kik auch") or by a sentence that uses different vocabulary to the one that it is paralleling (the children "wagten sich", while Kik "lief"; the children went back to "die Grundstücke ihrer Familien", while Kik returned "zur elterlichen Hütte"):

> Der Stammeskrieg hatte Kiks Dorf gegen zehn Uhr morgens erreicht. Kik war in der
>
> Schule, seine Eltern hielten sich zu Hause auf. Schon bei den ersten Feuerstößen liefen
>
> dir Kinder in den Wald. Kik war unter ihnen. Und solange Lärm im Dorf war, blieben die
>
> Kinder im Wald. Kik auch. Erst am nächsten Morgen, als keine Geräusche mehr zu hören
>
> waren, wagten sich die Kinder auf die Grundstücke ihrer Familien. Kik lief zur elterlichen
>
> Hütte (Kourouma 2004, 96)[11]

Similarly, the anadiplosis structure that occurs later in the story is weakened in the German version, with just one of the sentence endings becoming the beginning of the next sentence, rather than three: "Nach und nach ist Kik ein soldatisches Kind geworden. Der kindliche Soldat war pfiffig. Der pfiffige *small soldier* hat eine Abkürzung genommen. Dabei ist er auf eine Mine getreten" (Kourouma 2004, 96-7).[12]

The English version of the Kik story dilutes the repetitions to a lesser degree, retaining most of the parallelism in the first section and two out of three anadiplosis devices in the second:

The tribal wars arrived in Kik's village at about ten o'clock in the morning. The children were at school and their parents were at home. Kik was at school and his parents were at home. When they heard the first bursts of gunfire, the children ran into the forest. Kik ran into the forest. And the kids stayed in the forest all the time they could hear the gunfire from the village. Kik stayed in the forest. It was only the next morning when there was no more noise that the children dared to go back to their family huts. Kik went back to his family hut […] Gradually, Kik became a child-soldier. […] Kik was cunning. The cunning child-soldier took a shortcut. Taking a shortcut, he stepped on a mine. (Kourouma 2006, 90-91)

Elsewhere, the anadiplosis device is shown to be particularly vulnerable to dilution: the English and German versions of the other passage using anadiplosis cited above reveal partial and complete elimination of the device respectively:

I made a dash and fell on to the glowing embers. The fire did its job and grilled my arm. It grilled the arm of a poor little kid because Allah doesn't have to be fair about everything he does here on earth. (Kourouma 2006, 7)

Ich legte noch einen Zahn zu, und da fiel ich in die brennende Glut. Und die hat ganze Arbeit geleistet und meinen Arm orderntlich gegrillt. Sie hat mir armes Blag den Arm geröstet, denn Allah ist nicht verpflichtet, in allen Dingen, die er auf Erden tut, gerecht zu sein. (Kourouma 2004, 14)[13]

The repetition of the various leitmotifs shows less vulnerability to dilution overall in both the English and the German versions, with the titular leitmotif providing something of an

exception to this generalization. The principle reason behind the weakening of the *Allah n'est*

pas obligé refrain is that, whereas the original always draws on the verb "obliger" when citing

the leitmotif and its modulations, the English and German versions each use two different

terms for the main verb of the leitmotif, thereby rendering its repetition less obvious in the

text. In the German version, although the verb selected for the title and for the first two

introductory references to the leitmotif in the text is the modal verb "müssen" [to have to],

later citations of the leitmotif draw on the verb "verpflichten" [to oblige]. Inversely, the

English version uses the verb "obliged" in the title and in the introductory references, but

frequently has recourse to the modal verb "to have to" on subsequent occasions. Although it

is possible to argue that the leitmotif as a whole is still recognisable despite the synonymic

variation in the English and German versions, there are a number of important occasions

when statements may not be recognized as variations of the leitmotif because they are

incomplete renditions of it and depend, in the original, on the presence of the word "obligé"

to signal the link between the expression and the leitmotif. In the case of Birahima's

explanation of his mother's life of suffering, for example, the link between the statement

relating to Allah's and the spirits' lack of obligation to answer prayers and the titular leitmotif

is less clear in the English version than in the French original:

> Allah doesn't have to accept sacrifices and neither do the spirits of the ancestors. Allah
>
> can do whatever he feels like; he doesn't have to acquiesce to every prayer from every
>
> lowly human being ('acquiesce' means 'agree to'). The spirits of the ancestors can do
>
> what they like; they don't have to acquiesce to all our complicated prayers. (Kourouma
>
> 2006, 13)

Similarly, one of the earliest shifts from the "Allah" to the "je" is likely to go unrecognized in the

English version, due to the use of the modal verb rather than the verb "obliged": "whenever a child

soldier dies, we have to say a funeral oration. That means we have to recount how in this great big

fucked-up world they came to be a child-soldier. I do it when I feel like it, but I don't have to"

(Kourouma 2006, 83).

Although the German version does use the same verb in these examples as in the title

leitmotif, the decision to use the modal verb "müssen" rather than the more marked verb

"verpflichten" in the leitmotif means that the signal given to the reader that these are instances of

leitmotif repetition is much less clear. The verb "müssen" is, by its very nature, extremely common,

and occurs in many other contexts in the text, meaning that the reader is much less likely to see it as

a repetition of the title, or, even if s/he does recognize it as a repetition, to be sure that it is

deliberate rather than accidental. The German translations of the passages discussed above are as

follows:

Allah und die Manen der Ahnen nehmen nicht immer unbedingt alle Opfer an. (Manen

bedeutet: gute Geister, Seelen der Verstorbenen.) Allah macht, was er will; er muss

nicht unbedingt den armen Menschen alle Bitten gewähren. Auch did Manen machen,

was sie wollen; sie müssen nicht unbedingt den Betenden alle dringenden Wünsche

erfüllen. (Kourouma 2004, 21)[14]

Wenn ein Kindersoldat stirbt, muss man also eine Trauerrede auf ihn halten; das

bedeutet, man muss sagen, wie er in dieser großen beschissenen Welt ein Kindersoldat

werden konnte. Ich tue es nur, wenn ich es will, ich muss es nicht tun. (Kourouma 2004,

90)[15]

Overall, then, whereas in the original the pattern of leitmotif repetition and its modulation

can be easily followed throughout the original text, in the English and German versions the

repetition is less obvious, and the parallels between the statements involving "je" or "God" are

partially blurred. The potential of the leitmotif to convey both the abdication of responsibility for

trauma and the assumption of mastery over it is thus correspondingly weakened.

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Contextualizing inter-lingual translation practice

When these alterations to the repetitive structures of the original are read in the wider textual and paratextual contexts of the English and German versions of *Allah n'est pas obligé,* a number of different points relating to motivation and effect emerge. The diminution of repetition in the English version occurs in the context of a fairly close rendering of the source text, along with the retention of other markers of orality within the text, such as exclamations, ideophones and proverbs. Paratextual evidence, notably in the form of the Translator's Note included at the beginning of the book, reveals a strong overall positing of the relevance of oral-tradition discourse by the translator. The translator indicates that he has been aided by 'recordings of the oral narratives of child-soldiers' and states that 'when all else has failed, I have been guided by my ear, and by the music of contemporary *griots* Abdul Tee-Jay, Usifu Jalloh and Bajourou' (Wynne 2006). Wynne's use of the term 'oral narratives' – rather than 'stories' or 'testimonies' – to refer to the child-soldiers' accounts of their experiences is striking, and posits a line of continuity between traditional oral narratives and contemporary forms of communication that many would not take as a given. Another notable aspect of Wynne's view of orality that emerges here is its generality: in order to translate Birahima's voice well, Wynne has found useful the voices of a number of West African musicians, viewing these as present-day perpetuators of oral tradition ("contemporary *griots*"). Once again, through his phrasing, Wynne indirectly draws a line of continuity between centuries-old African oral traditions and the present-day, between African oral literature canons and Kourouma's novel. Both the study of the translator's textual choices and his paratextual positioning thus indicate that the diminution of repetition in the translated version is not to be read as an effort to weaken the orality of the text, but rather as evidence that repetition is construed as one among a body of stylistic devices that convey orality, and as such may be reduced so long as the overall orality of the text is conveyed by other means.

This analysis indicates that Wynne's translation approach fits soundly within the interpretative paradigm outlined in the opening paragraphs of this article, according to which Kourouma's novel is to be read as a translation of an "oral-tradition discourse into a written one" (Bandia 2008, 38), or as part of an African mode of discourse that has orality as its "matrix" and as the "fundamental reference" of its "imaginative mode" (Irele 2001, 11). Wynne's citation of Kwaku Gyasi's article, 'Writing as Translation', elsewhere in the Note, further confirms the interpretative framework according to which the translation has been carried out.[16] While few would contest the relevance of orality to Kourouma's works in general, my analysis of the stylistic and thematic importance of the repetition-governed structures in *Allah n'est pas obligé* and their alteration in translation suggests that there are two dangers associated with such an interpretative framework.

Firstly, such a framework runs the risk of treating the relevance of orality to African fiction in overly general terms, ignoring the specific relation of the spoken word to the written one in individual works. To make this point is to take up an argument developed by Moradewun Adejunmobi in her examination of works by Amadou Hampaté Bâ. In her article, Adejunmobi (2000, 27) argues that "it is time to move beyond discussions of Hampaté Bâ's work whose objective it is to prove that orality accounts for the distinctiveness of his writing, and to begin considering other kinds of filiation between orality and writing in his texts", stressing Bâ's focus, in *L'étrange destin de Wangrin* and *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul,* on the moment of the transition to writing, rather than on invoking tradition for its own sake. In a similar vein, we might argue that the interplay between orality and writing finds very different expression in each of Kourouma's novels, and that in *Allah n'est pas obligé*, the focus is not on traditional oral narrative structures or events, but rather on the importance of writing down Birahima's spoken words in such a way that many different kinds of people, speaking different varieties of languages, can read his story. Orality, in this case, is used not to valorize tradition, but to individualize experience, turning a 'child-soldier' from a faceless, almost abstract, category into an individual with charisma and a sharp sense of humour.

Secondly, the dominance of the interpretative framework based around orality renders readers, critics and translators alike vulnerable to what might be termed interpretative 'pigeon-holing', encouraging them, when reading African fiction, to subsume features such as repetition, ideophones and exclamations under the broad heading 'orality', rather than according each stylistic variation the interpretative attention it deserves. Such an approach means that alternative readings of 'orality-inflected' passages are rarely considered, and translators are less likely to use style as "the basis and focal point for a translation" (Boase-Beier 2006, 112), or to view style as indicative of "the cognitive state of the speaker or writer" (114) than they might be for, say, literature originating in the West.

If the broader contexts of the English renderings of repetition-based passages indicate that their diminution may be a consequence of the dominance of an orality-based interpretative framework, the textual and paratextual contexts of the German renderings point to a rather different explanation. The German version of *Allah n'est pas obligé* contains a number of striking amendments to the original text, including a significant number of additions. Particularly noticeable among these are the inserted sentence, "Ich habe den Ausbruch des Bürgerkriegs nicht selbst miterlebt, aber ich höre immer gut zu, wenn ein anderer Kindersoldat oder unsere Kriegsherrn oder Yacouba etwas zu erzählen haben"[17] before Birahima's historical summary of the development of the various factions involved in the Liberian civil war. This insertion appears to be an attempt to make Birahima's extensive knowledge of political events appear more plausible, an interpretation that is consistent with epitextual material in the form of an openly available letter from the German publishers defending decisions taken during the translation process. The relevant section of the letter offers valuable insights into the overall approach governing the translation:

Es gibt in der Erzählung einen „Bruch" [...] Es geht darum, dass plötzlich und unvermittelt der kleine Birahima seitenlange Erklärungen mit Fakten und Namen niederschreibt, die seinen Horizont völlig übersteigen. Die Perspektive des Erzählers droht dadurch ganz und gar unglaublich zu werden. Ich habe diesen Bruch nicht

eliminiert; die gezielten Zusätze in diesen Passagen haben nur ein einziges Ziel: den

Leser darauf aufmerksam zu machen, dass der Text selbst [...] ein Bewusstsein für

diesen Bruch hat. Auch hier galt es zu berücksichtigen, dass ein deutschsprachiges

Publikum dieses Heraustreten aus der Erzählperspektive viel stärker wahrnimmt als

jeder französischsprachige Leser. (Bracht, 2005)[18]

This citation reveals the extent to which translation decisions – and it should be noted that the

phrasing of the letter indicates that many of these were the publishers', rather than the translator's

– were taken based on what the publisher perceived to be the target audience's needs and levels of

tolerance. Other significant alterations in the German translation such as the omission of many of

Birahima's bracketed definitions, and another even longer insertion in the final paragraphs of the

text, are justified in the letter on the same basis, as is the elimination of "die bewusste sprachliche

Unbeholfenheit" [the conscious linguistic awkwardness] (Bracht 2005) that Bracht sees as a central

characteristic of Kourouma's text. As an example of such awkwardness, Bracht gives the tenfold

repetition of "avant" [before] on a single page, arguing that the French reader would take such

repetition as evidence that "das fictive Ich des Texts eben die Sprache nur mühsam beherrscht" [the

fictional I of the text speaks the language only with some difficulty] (ibid.); a German reader, by

contrast, would read such repetition as "eine lästige Unbeholfenheit, die er instinktiv der

Übersetzung angelästet hätte" [an irritating awkwardness, which he would have blamed instinctively

on the translation] (ibid.) The dominant interpretative paradigm that appears to have governed the

German publisher's reading of the text thus appears to be not orality, but linguistic difference, a

supposition that is further supported by the translation's peritext.[19] According to such a framework,

strangeness in style is to be read as linguistic incompetence and/or variation, and while such an

interpretation may in many cases be valid – Birahima's identity as someone who speaks *petit nègre*

is after all foregrounded in the opening pages of the novel – it runs the same risk of 'pigeon-holing',

rather than encouraging interrogation of each variation of style in its specificity. Furthermore, when

coupled with a target-oriented translation approach, such as the one used in the German translation of *Allah n'est pas obligé,* it renders such stylistic variations highly vulnerable to standardisation on the basis that they are not considered good style in the target language.

Implications of a translation-of-trauma reading for postcolonial translation approaches

The interpretative frameworks governing the English and German translations of *Allah n'est pas obligé* (the 'orality matrix' and the 'linguistic difference' matrix, respectively), can be linked to two strands of interpretation that have dominated critical reception of African literature from the mid-twentieth century to the present-day. If there is a growing sense, both among postcolonial studies scholars and translation studies theorists, that such strands are no longer – or perhaps never have been – sufficient, this brief study of *Allah n'est pas obligé* across three languages may be seen as adding to that sense of unease, illustrating the way in which potential alternative readings run the risk of being shut down when translations are carried out according to the assumed relevance of a dominant paradigm. This article is thus in some senses an argument in favour of postcolonial translation approaches that are literary translation approaches, first and foremost, rather than 'postcolonial', taking a literary approach as "the translation of style, because style is the expression of mind, and literature is a reflection of mind" (Boase-Beier 2006, 112).

Yet to argue in favour of such an approach neither presents any straightforward practical translation solutions nor represents a move away from the notion of the postcolonial altogether. Both of these points can be illustrated by returning to the passage in which Birahima presents Kik's funeral oration. What would a translation based on style look like for this passage? Would a close rendering, retaining all of the repetitive patterns, be likely to open up similar readings to those associated with the French passage? If, as I have argued above, the syntactic patterning can be construed as therapeutic story-telling, bringing the story into line with Malinke story-telling patterns (or in other words, as a specifically African, orality-inflected, instance of trauma-telling), would that same reading be open to a target audience with very different story-telling norms? Or would the

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simple, repetitive syntax connote something rather different – a regression into childishness,

perhaps, that might be taken as a sign that the event had not been successfully processed at all by

the speaker? Alternatively, if Peter Vakunta (2010, 9) is correct in his assertion that repetition is

viewed as "anathema" in Western literary tradition, then would its retention simply connote poor

style – and indeed, poor translation – for many readers, as argued by the German publishers of *Allah

n'est pas obligé?* The notion of the 'postcolonial' is undoubtedly needed here in order to interrogate

differences among reading publics and writing traditions, and to stress the plurality of

interpretations that is a feature of any literary reading but that becomes particularly acute in

relation to languages used in very different geographical and cultural spaces.

When such issues are considered not only in the academic abstract but also in the real spaces

of publishing and bookselling, the relevance of the postcolonial perhaps becomes even more

apparent. For translators and publishers must deal not simply with questions of variation in

stylistically-aware readings, but with the perceptions (real or assumed) of 'Africa' and 'African

literature' that dominate the target cultures into which they are looking to insert their text. The back

cover blurb of the German version of *Allah n'est pas obligé* offers an intriguing insight into the way

such perceptions can shape a translation's paratexts, the short summary of the plot evoking

centuries-old tropes of 'Africa' whose actual relevance to Kourouma's novel are highly debatable:

> In Westafrika herrscht Krieg, und der zwölfjährige Waise Birahima hat nur eine Chance,
>
> in diesem Chaos zu überleben : Er muss Kindersoldat werden. An der Seite eines
>
> erfahrenen Fetischpriesters aus seinem Heimatdorf erlebt er dabei unvorstellbare
>
> Grausamkeiten, aber auch **Momente, die erfüllt sind von der Magie seiner Vorfahren**
>
> **und der Schönheit seines Landes.** Und es sind genau diese Augenblicke, did Birahima
>
> Kraft schenken, niemals aufzugeben... (Kourouma 2004, my emphasis)[20]

Just what these moments are that are filled with the magic of Birahima's ancestors or with the

beauty of the African landscape would be hard to pinpoint for any reader, and their irrelevance

makes the use of these tropes in the marketing of the book highly significant, implying that these are the themes that a German reader associates with Africa, and with African writing – or at the very least that are deemed by publishers to make such a book marketable. The shift in emphasis enacted through the back cover blurb – supported, it might be noted, by the cover image which depicts a clean, brightly clothed young boy staring out over a clean ocean – reveals a strong parallel with the paratextual strategies that Richard Watts posits as characteristic of US publishers' approaches to francophone literature:

> On the whole, the information contained in these paratexts is less precise than in their French counterparts. The works are subtly pushed towards other, broader literary-cultural categories, which suggests that publishers perceive resistance among the prospective readership of these texts to the particularly foreign and to foreign particularity. One way to diminish the text's foreignness […] is to confine it to a past that cannot interfere with a present. The other way is to place the text in categories previously assimilated by the readership that no longer connote radical alterity. (Watts 2005, 171)

In some senses, all of the dominant interpretative paradigms that emerge through the textual and paratextual translation strategies studied here serve to edge Kourouma's novel towards comfortable, previously assimilated categories, whether these be oral literary traditions, colonial linguistic heritages, or, to draw on Watts' (2005, 164) analysis of US-published literature once again, 'a nebulous, subtly romanticized, and exotic "before"'. While translators and publishers must inevitably take target audience considerations into account to some degree, having easy recourse to existing tropes in an age when Western media is growing ever more aware of the problematic, outdated nature of its images of Africa, must surely become increasingly inappropriate. Similarly, while the complexity of translation decisions is not diminished by working with a wider set of source text interpretations generated by paying maximum attention to specific variations in style, it is only

through such an approach that thorny questions around assertion of agency, processing of traumatic memory, negotiation of victim or perpetrator status, questioning of belief systems, and international responses and responsibilities, will be able to fully emerge.

Notes

[1] Throughout the article, where the English translation is adequate for the purposes of the immediate discussion, I have cited it directly; where it is not, I have cited the French original and provided my own translation in square brackets.

[2] Kourouma's own insistence on the testimonial nature of all of his novels, as well as his biographer's account of how Kourouma wrote *Allah n'est pas obligé* in response to the pleas of Djiboutian child-soldiers and researched it by listening to the stories of children involved in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean conflict, indicate that there is also strong potential for reading the novel as a fictionalized testimony based on an amalgamation of real-life testimonies, or even as Kourouma's own effort to engage in therapeutic story-telling in response to becoming a witness of trauma. See Ouédraogo (2000, 1338) and Jean-Michel Djian (2010, 160-161).

[3] On the other hand, the excess of words that characterizes the narrative, and more specifically, the repeated foregrounding of the need to define and explain (notably through the bracketed explanations developed apparently with the help of various dictionaries), could be linked to the aporetic current in the sense that this tends to promote the view that "testimony is never adequate, […] it can never bridge the gap between words and experience" (Tal 1996, 2).

[4] Such Eurocentric formulations are summarized by Craps & Buelens (2008, 5): "Within trauma studies, it has become all but axiomatic that traumatic experiences can only be adequately represented through the use of experimental, (post)modernist textual strategies". For a cogent summary of Craps and Buelens' project and of the issues at stake more generally in an attempted move towards postcolonial trauma theory, see Visser (2011).

[5] I went too quickly, too far, I didn't want to get caught. I tore along, I fell into the burning embers. The burning embers did their work, they grilled my arm. They grilled the arm of a poor child like me because Allah is not obliged to be fair in all the things he does on earth.

[6] Herman is drawing here on Robert Lifton (1980).

[7] In Kik's village, the tribal war arrived at about 10 o'clock in the morning. The children were at school and the parents at home. Kik was at school and his parents at home. As soon as the firing started, the children ran into the forest. Kik ran into the forest. And, for as long as there was noise in the village, the children stayed in the forest. Kik stayed in the forest. It was not until the next morning, when there was no noise anymore, that the children ventured into their family compounds. Kik went back to his family compound […] Kik became a child-soldier. The child-soldier was clever. The clever child-soldier took a shortcut. When he took the shortcut, he stepped on a mine […] We abandoned him as he was dying one afternoon, in a fucked-up village, to the villagers' condemnation. To public condemnation because that is how Allah wanted the poor boy to end his days on earth. And Allah is not obliged, doesn't need to be fair in all his things, in all his creations, in all his actions here below.

[8] See Kourouma 2000, 39; 137.

[9] It should be noted, however, that there is some variance in the degree to which Birahima appears to 'own' the three belief statements: while "Allah is not obliged to be faire about all the things he does here on earth" and "that's the way it is with tribal wars" appear to be his own formulations, "Allah never leaves empty a mouth he has created" is repeatedly attributed to other people, notably to Yacouba and, in adapted form, Marie-Béatrice.

[10] Such beliefs are epitomized in Birahima's summary of the villagers' response to his mother's death: "They all said maman would go straight up to heaven to be with Allah because of all the hardships and sufferings she'd had down here on earth and because Allah didn't have any more hardships and sufferings left to give her" (Kourouma 2006, 25).

[11] The tribal war reached Kik's village at about 10 o'clock in the morning. Kik was in school, his parents were at home. As soon as the first shots were fired the children ran into the woods. Kik was with them. And while there was still noise in the village, the children stayed in the woods. Kik too. It was not until the next morning, when there were no more sounds to be heard, that the children dared go to their families' homes. Kik ran to his parents' hut.

[12] Little by little Kik became a soldierly child. The childish soldier was smart. The smart *small soldier* took a shortcut. In so doing he trod on a mine.

13 I put on a bit of speed and fell into the burning embers. And they did a good job and grilled my arm really well. They roasted the arm of this poor brat, because Allah is not obliged to be fair in all the things that he does on earth.

14 Allah and the Manes of the ancestors don't always necessarily accept all sacrifices. (Manes means: good Spirits, souls of the deceased.) Allah does whatever he wants; he doesn't necessarily have to grant poor humans all their requests. And the Manes also do whatever they want: they don't necessarily have to fulfil all the urgent wishes of those who pray to them.

15 When a child-soldier dies, you have to hold a funeral speech for him; that means you have to say how he came to be a child-soldier in this big fucked-up world. I only do it if I want to, I don't have to do it.

16 Gyasi (1999, 82) pursues a similar line of thinking to that put forward by Bandia and Irele, arguing for example that "African writers are creative translators in the sense that in their works, they convey concepts and values from a given linguistic, oral culture into a written form in an alien language".

17 I didn't experience the outbreak of the civil war myself, but I always listen when another child-soldier or one of our leaders or Yacouba have stories to tell.

18 There is a 'break' in the narrative […] Suddenly and unannounced, little Birahima writes down explanations with facts and names that are pages long and that go well beyond his realm of knowledge. The narratorial perspective thus risks becoming completely implausible. I did not eliminate this break; the deliberate insertions around these passages have a single goal: to make the reader aware that the text itself […] is conscious of this break. This was another place where it was important to take into account that a German-speaking audience would perceive the departure from the narratorial perspective much more strongly than any French-speaking reader.

19 The wording on the inner title page of the German translation runs as follows: "Aus dem afrikanischen Französisch von Sabine Herting" [translated from African French by Sabine Herting] (Kourouma 2004).

20 There is war in West Africa, and the twelve year-old orphan Birahima has only one way of surviving the chaos: he must become a child-soldier. With an experienced fetish priest from his native village as his companion, he experiences unimaginable atrocities, but also moments that are filled with the magic of his ancestors and the beauty of his land. And it is precisely these moments that give Birahima the strength to carry on...

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