

**I THINK THEREFORE I AM:
LINKING HUMAN EXPLOITATION TO RELIGIOUS IRRATIONALITY IN
KOUROUMA'S *ALLAH IS NOT OBLIGED***

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ABSTRACT

Kourouma's narrative texts bring to the fore misery and desperation, resulting largely from human exploitation connected to ignorance and religious irrationality. Descartes' all time famous statement "I think therefore I am" grounds the essence of human existence on thinking. Descartes' assertion has implications for religion when it is postulated as the quest for the ultimate source of meaning in life. Kourouma's (2000) *Allah is Not Obligated* establishes a link between human exploitation and unsound practice of religion, revealing his nauseating aversion to and denunciation of irrational religion. From literary and philosophy of religion perspectives, *Allah is Not Obligated* can be read as a narrative that raises consciousness about the potential of irrational religion becoming a source of exploitation and mental enslavement. Within the framework of such reading, *Allah is Not Obligated* becomes a plea for an intra-cultural critique of African religiosity.

Keywords

exploitation, irrational, religion, intra-cultural critique, Kourouma

Introduction

Several themes attract the attention of readers of *Allah is Not Obligated* (Kourouma 2006). There are, for example, issues regarding cultural translation, abuse of child and human rights, misuse of political power, gender, atrocities of war, poverty, ignorance, human propensity to fundamental evil and violence and the place of religion in all of these situations. Among this plenitude of themes, we choose to study Kourouma's treatment of religion – Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion – and the risk of its abuse, unless it is practiced with introspection. Our reading is without prejudice to the position of literary critics who discredit the appreciation of *Allah is Not Obligated* "at the first level of meaning" (Ndiaye 2007, 96) for impoverishing the literariness of the text.

It is also important to underscore the fact that scholars who focus on the theme of religion interpret Kourouma's portrayal of religion in *Allah is Not Obligated* differently. They may choose sociological, anthropological, theological, or other perspectives. For example, some scholars, who read the text from a Marxist theoretical perspective, are particularly concerned to explore how Kourouma negatively perceives the spiritual significance of religion. In the words of Darko-Ankra, reading Kourouma from the Marxist's perspective helps to "explain why when the religious and spiritual phenomenon [...] confronts [*sic*] the realities of the socio-economic and political, it capitulates to them" (Darko-Ankra 2013, 11). This way of reading Kourouma makes a general abnegation of religion, based on a materialistic interpretation of reality, the central issue. But a disclaimer of religion – generally – as an untenable phenomenon is one thing, while the request for religion to possess an internal rational structure is another thing. This rational structure of religion must be strong enough, at least, to disallow its misuse for inducing a consenting attitude towards dehumanizing conditions or for promoting violence, exploitation and squalor.

The objective here is to explore how Kourouma repudiates irrational practice of religion by linking it to human exploitation and the collapse of society through his narrative in *Allah is Not Obligated*. We propose that by studying the text from a combination of literary and philosophy of religion perspectives, we can discover how Kourouma uses linguistic tools to project the real risk of misusing religion as a vehicle of exploitation and dehumanization in situations of war, ignorance and poverty. This interdisciplinary reading is informed by the fact that *Allah is Not Obligated* is a literary work that raises philosophical questions about the logic of religion in a given context.

As a literary work, the novel is to entertain, to convey meaning, and more importantly, to make the reader aware of some aspects of the human condition akin to religious exploitation and dehumanization in war torn Liberia and Sierra Leone. By literary perspective, we mean an appreciation of the technical tools of language that enabled the author to compel a second look at some taken-for-granted attitudes in African religiosity.

The philosophy of religion perspective helps to understand the novel from the background of philosophical themes such as the ontology and meaning of moral and natural evil in the world, the role of God in human experience of calamity, the relation between morality and religion and, especially, how to account rationally for the relevance of religion in a situation of social, economic and political jumble. Reading the text from these perspectives unmasks the implicit concerns of Kourouma about the

urgent need to undertake an intra-cultural critique of the role of religion in the political, social and economic affairs in contemporary African history. In a sense, the critique of the “fairness of Allah” inclines into a critique of the fairness of Allah’s worshippers in the novel’s cosmos. Elsewhere a similar idea has been expressed with the observation that by using an uneducated orphan as mouthpiece and making him struggle to find the right expressions for the seriousness of the situation, Kourouma was probably reverting to “the old school of picaresque writing, common during periods of social upheaval. In this way he could deliver an inter-African reminder that they themselves must take responsibility for their own malheurs” (Gray 2013, 154).

Profile of Kourouma’s *Allah is Not Obligated*

Ahmadou Kourouma was born in 1927 in the small town of Boundiali in the Ivory Coast. He fought in the French colonial army in his earlier years as a young man. This military engagement took him to Mainland Southeast Asia (Indochina). He later studied science in France. Back in his country, Kourouma worked in the insurance and banking industries for many years. Having fallen foul of the dictatorial regime of Houphouët Boigny, first president of the Republic of Ivory Coast after independence from France in 1960, Kourouma was jailed and subsequently spent many years in exile. He passed on in Lyon, France, in November 2004.

Kourouma hit the limelight towards the end of the second decade of the second-half of the twentieth Century following the publication of his award-winning novel, *Les Soleils des Indépendances* in 1968 in Canada. This novel, which was earlier on rejected by French publishers, because of the author’s style and novel way of using the French language, achieved enviable recognition two years later following its success in the francophone literary world. It was then published in Paris by Les Editions du Seuil (1970). These publishers will subsequently publish all of Kourouma’s novels. *Monnè, outrages et défis* (1990), *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998), and *Allah n’est pas obligé* (2000). Throughout the francophone literary world, Kourouma remains a towering figure through his literary artistry and humanistic frankness. He is noted for the novelty of his language, which includes a subtle grafting of his native Malinke phraseology, rhythm, and thought processes onto the French language. This ‘linguistic hybrid’ leads to a realistic creation of characters with their natural idiosyncrasies in his novels. The aesthetic textual upholstery which results from Kourouma’s linguistic dexterity is used to express his plea for a symbiotic coexistence of all humanity as a way of ensuring sustainable development across the globe.

Allah is Not Obligated is Ahmadou Kourouma's fourth and last novel published in his lifetime. Initially written in French as *Allah n'est pas obligé*, the story is a mixture of fiction and fact narrated by Birahima, a ten or twelve-year-old child, who, in search of his aunt following the demise of his mother, sets off to Liberia but falls into the hands of belligerent rebels embroiled in fratricidal war and ends up with a Kalashnikov in his hands. The review comment of *The Economist*, captured on the back cover of the English translation by Frank Wynne observes, "*Allah is Not Obligated* [...] deftly captures the mixture of horror, fascination and detachment with which a child views the world of grown-up folly." Birahima penetratingly recounts his horrific adventure as a child-soldier in war-torn Liberia and Sierra Leone in the last decade of the twentieth century. Among other things, the story brings to the fore the destructive contribution of unreflective religious beliefs and practices to an already unimaginable condition of dehumanization. The child-soldier-narrator lays bare the falsity associated with such beliefs and practices in Christianity, Islam and Traditional African Religion during the Liberian and Sierra-Leonean civil wars. The summary on the back cover of the English version printed by Vintage Books aptly notes: "Birahima's story is one of horror and laughter. ... He tells of the chaotic and terrible adventures that follow in the career as small-soldier with heart-breaking bravado and wisdom."

The suggestion that "Africans are notoriously religious" (Mbiti 1969, 1) resonates with the statement that "Africans have been called incurably religious" (Parrinder 1962, 9). This idea of pervasive African religiosity is unequivocally held up for critical review in the narrative of *Allah is Not Obligated*. The discourse of the novel unveils the gaping chasm between religious beliefs and practices and the existential needs and living conditions of the novel's characters. Through *Allah is Not Obligated*, Kourouma creatively shares his ideas and expresses themes that are timeless and universal, but one of the most compelling narrative functions of Birahima, the child-soldier-narrator in Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated*, is an uncompromising critical inquisition into the trappings of unreflective religious belief and practices. This point is emphatically made in the very opening statement of Birahima: "the full, final and complete title of my bullshit story is: Allah is not obliged to be fair about all the things he does here on earth" (Kourouma 2006, 1).

Analysed from the perspective of philosophy of religion, this assertion of Birahima contains more questions than propositions. Questions that arise include the goodness (the author uses the term "fairness") of Allah in the face of human (moral) evil and natural calamity. Associated with this are the issues of a passive response to the doctrine of pre-estima-

tion in Islam, attended, in this context, by the belief in malevolent spirits and the evil machinations of witches. There is also the question, if not palpable ridicule, of the absurdity in repeating the same rituals over and over without results. Similarly, the narrative sarcastically probes whether Allah rewards evildoers just for mechanistically performing religious rituals (Kourouma 2006, 14–16; 30–35; 54–74; 128–133; 180). Above all, the narrative artistically clothes the philosophical dispute about the logic in accepting dehumanization, a culture of chaos and near survival of the fittest as the will of the divine and acquiesce to it.

The opening statement is thus a kind of abridged storyline of *Allah is Not Obligated*. Birahima, by this initial statement, questions all forms of unconsidered religious beliefs, which predispose people to accepting roles as culprits and/or victims of exploitation and dehumanization. In this way, Kourouma, through his narrative, ignites the age-long debate about 'rational religion' in the African context. In the West, it was thought that the Enlightenment had won the debate on the side of reason, as exemplified in Descartes's famous reflection: "I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think; for it might possibly be the case if I ceased entirely to think, that I should likewise cease altogether to exist" (Haldane 2011, 28). This view premises human existence and essence on the ability to think, and thus act reflectively and reasonably. Yet, the concrete realization of Descartes' axiom, whether in the West or in Africa is not as clear as the statement itself. In many cases, even in contemporary cultures, people continue to vacillate between the extremes of over reliance on religion or reason. In Africa, the tendency is for people to orient themselves, on the average, towards the former extreme. This orientation, which is then erroneously interpreted as "incurable religiosity", comes under literary scrutiny in *Allah is Not Obligated*.

Analysing his portrayal of religion gives sufficient room to assume that in *Allah is Not Obligated*, Kourouma is calling to question the traditional justification of religious claims in ways that are reminiscent of French philosophy of religion of the modern era and its related cultural critique. French philosophy of the modern era approaches religion with a certain polarization that sets culture and religion against each other (Sanneh 1998). African literalists using French as a medium of literature have, inadvertently, had their works adapting the French cultural rationalism to view religion in Africa. Kourouma attracts our attention in this regard, though his was not just a translation of modern French rationalism into the African context. His artistic achievement, from the philosophical and literary perspectives, is due to his successful development of a narrative

that deconstructs popular and often clichéd beliefs in his part of the world without necessarily calling for an outright rejection of religion.

Kourouma's narrative (of) religion as a narrative ethic

Kourouma uses the term religion in the primary sense to imply the practice of Traditional African Religion, Islam, Christianity and (frequently) a syncretistic blend of all three religions. In a secondary sense, he conceptualizes religion mostly in the form of belief, ritual and tradition. However, Kourouma is an artist confronting what he obviously considers an unexamined approach to religion. Hence, he uses the tools of rhetoric to fuse the primary and secondary meanings behind his view of religion. He achieves this fusion of meanings in the way he portrays how the main characters of the narrative use religion in the face of violence, deprivation and calamity. They engage in iterative ritual acts, which reinforce religious belief even when such rituals only intensify the dehumanizing circumstances of life. In this way, Kourouma reaches deep into intellectual and popular traditions that have always held up African religiosity as a characteristic cultural distinction. He challenges the status quo and calls for a re-interpretation of the place of religion in the African context. The call for an intra-cultural critique is, for our purposes, one of the outstanding strengths of Kourouma's narrative of religion in the novel.

Consider, for instance, the question about the goodness and determination of Allah in the face of intolerable suffering of an individual as exemplified in the case of Maman (Kourouma 2006, 6–17). Growing up, Birahima saw his mother (maman) suffering from some gangrenous ailment that was “eating into [her] right leg and rotting it. [...] An ulcer that steered my mother and the rest of the family” (Kourouma 2006, 7). The narrative succeeds in describing the religious fatalism that undergirded the force with which the “ulcer” held maman and the entire family to ransom. Kourouma espouses the negativities of such religious despondency when it is enforced at the expense of the victim and thus protected from any rational deconstruction.

African religious traditions would usually ascribe the agency of evil to destiny and causes other than “Allah;” but Kourouma pushes his readers to tackle the irony of the existence of moral and natural evil and the claim that Allah is all good. A full treatment of what we can learn from Kourouma regarding African perspectives on the problem of evil is not envisaged in this essay. Yet, at the heart of his hyperbolic presentation of human suffering is a call to lessen the tendency to spiritualize evil, and instead heighten human moral responsibility for it. By allowing Birahima to give the reader a biographical sketch of his childhood, set in the con-

text of the pain of his mother and her hut, Kourouma uses sarcasm and a narrative technique that comes close to antiphony (call-and-response) to depict the vicious circle that arises from an uncritical approach to “destiny” as defence for the goodness of “Allah” in popular religious discourse in Africa. Some excerpts from the text may help to illustrate the point. Birahima recalls:

I was crawling around all over the place and getting into everything. Sometimes, I'd fall on to maman's ulcer and she'd howl with the pain. The ulcer would start bleeding. Maman would howl like a hyena with its paws caught in the teeth of a wolf trap. She would start crying. [...]

'Dry your tears and stop your bawling,' grandmother used to say. 'Allah created each one of us and decided our fate [...] You were born with pain from your ulcer. [...] You should pray. [...] Allah does not mete out suffering without cause.' [...] Mum dried her tears and stopped crying and we'd go back to playing our games and chasing each other round the house. (Kourouma 2006, 9)

In the very next sentence, Birahima continues his narrative:

then there was one morning when she [maman] stopped playing with me, howling in pain and choking from her sobs.

'I don't know what you're whining about. You should pray [...] give thanks to Allah for his goodness. [...] Grand mother [sic] said this and asked maman to pray. Maman dried her tears and prayed with grandmother (Kourouma 2006, 9–10).

This triadic movement from maman's suffering, grandmother's call to prayer and the response in the drying of tears and going back to doing the same old things continues even when the victim in one case is the innocent child Birahima:

the day my arm got grilled, maman cried and cried and her throat and her chest were all swollen with sobs. My grandmother and father showed up and they both lost their temper and yelled at maman.

'This is simply another ordeal which Allah has sent you. [...] If Allah has ordained that you be miserable here on earth, it is because he has reserved some greater happiness for you in paradise.'

My maman dried her eyes, swallowed her sobs and prayed with grandmother. Then maman and I went back to playing chase. (Kourouma 2006, 10)

These excerpts put together a technique of narration that is typical of *Allah is Not Obligated*. It is the effort to weave a narrative of self- and other destructive behaviour, imagined as concentric vicious circles revolving fatalistically in a religiously sustained cosmology (Okpewhoe 2003; Asa-

moah-Gyadu 2010). The vicious circle may be individual or communal, but the narrative makes it clear that the result is usually exploitative and dehumanizing. In a sense, Kourouma portrays irrational religion in war-torn Liberia and its neighbouring countries as moral perversion that makes life look bizarre even in the eyes of a degenerate child-soldier.

For example, religious moral perversion finds expression in *Allah is Not Obligated* in the persons and roles of Moussokoroni, Yakouba-Tiécoura, Johnson, Sister Hadja Aminata, and Papa Le Bon (Kourouma 2006, 14–16; 30ff; 128–133; 180ff.; 54–74). In all these instances the literary tools used tacitly raise the question as to whether God rewards evil doers just because they perfunctorily perform religious acts. The repetition of religious rituals without logical justification is portrayed in health care practices, war rituals, soothsaying, for example, the case of Sekou (Kourouma 2006, 41ff.), and child-soldier rituals. The narrative also poses the question about the place of religion in war and vice versa. Through the use of metaphor, hyperbole, cynicism, sarcasm, imagery, and repetition, the text leaves it to the reader to cognitively deal with puzzles such as who receives supernatural support from which god when enemies in war perform same rituals.

Given that conditions of life keep getting worse while religious commitment received more fervor, Birahima's narrative could be nothing other than a 'bullshit story' to the extent that life itself is a narrative. Herein lies the imagery and critique of the idea of religion that is trendy in the Africa of *Allah is Not Obligated*. It is a conception that makes people religionize all aspects of life, no matter how much it leads to exploitation, without wanting to break the vicious circle and try other alternatives to religionism. This approach is a call for a radical intra-cultural critique of African religiosity. Kourouma would seem to be saying that in its present form, there is something irrational –nonsensical (bullshit) about attitudes to religion in Africa. However, he seems to interpret irrational in the sense of ancient Greek philosophy, where that which is irrational is unethical. Kourouma's narrative of religion is thus a narrative ethic.

Kourouma's rationalism and religious rationalism

It is possible to describe Kourouma as a rationalist in the line of modernist French religious rationalism. This is not to suggest that Kourouma is either the incarnation of, say, Abelard (1121) or of Descartes (1637/1641 2011); but his manner of storytelling places him close to the philosophical and theological traditions that the former nursed, which developed greatly in the work of the latter.

The concern in the middle ages was about the relation between reason and the claims that the Christian religion held as revealed truths. Between Abelard and Descartes lies a long history of events in the competition between religion and science as sources of knowing the world as it is. By the time of the scientific revolution, the tension of reason versus revelation had moved one step further. The question was no more just about how rational the claims of revelation were, but about the possibility of knowing the nature of things in the world and of the universe itself without resorting to revelation. Scientists were at pains to show that the miracles of religion were explainable through an understanding of the laws of nature.

This scientific search and approach to understanding the world soon gave way to a philosophical doubt that formed the foundation of Descartes' scepticism, which is insinuated in the title of this paper. But the scientific turn did not occur out of the blue. It was itself a reaction to the long years of the epistemic monopoly that the Christian religion exercised in Europe. The "science" that existed then was only considered to the extent that it helped to solve pragmatic needs such as basic agriculture, domestic, culinary and (by today's standards) simple military equipment for the wars that were a regular feature of the time. Yet, even while survival needs were being met with the minimum science and technology that was available, religion reigned as the source of knowledge about the nature of things physical and metaphysical and its significance for daily affairs remained intractably strong.

Against this background, some scholars have proposed that the scientific revolution and the enlightenment processes it engendered emanated from the search for new solutions to the questions and needs of life and a desire to free the human spirit from the overbearing domination of religion in all spheres of life (Matthews and Pratt 2001). No wonder that at the peak of events during the enlightenment, the tendency was to reject religion and consider its views as nothing other than myths that worsened rather than improved the human condition. This stance was like throwing out the bath water together with the baby. The human tendency to move from one extreme to the other pushed thinkers to engage in a battle aimed at dismantling the grand myth of religion. Thus, the enlightenment project was convinced that reason alone and not religion, had the answers for improving humanity through science and technology. Today, with hindsight, scholars of the history of science point out that this was an extreme stance, which only succeeded in replacing one grand myth with another, instead of banishing religion from human experience (Bibeau 2011).

Not everything, however, about the stance of the enlightenment regarding religion can be dismissed as extreme. Among other things, the

enlightenment led scholars to plunge into a vociferous cultural critique of religious claims that were no longer tenable for the Europe of their day. There ensued a strong crisis of interpretation, which necessitated an equally strong need to re-interpret the traditions, customs, beliefs and cultural practices of society (Tracy 1987). This reinterpretation consisted of questioning conventional religious modes of knowing and understanding reality. In a sense, what is sometimes called secularization is partly the result of the reinterpretation of religious claims, which previously served as the most ordinary way of negotiating life in a simple and non-scientific setting.

While Kourouma's narrative engages religion in ways that are similar to enlightenment approaches, his story line does not juxtapose religion and science; he is rather playing what we might call 'irrational religion' against its own results. Kourouma paints the picture of irrational religion through a narrative whose characters repeatedly engage in the same beliefs, traditions and practices, which are evidently hopeless. Yet, paradoxically, the more the religious beliefs and practices failed in their outcome, the higher the intensity with which they were repeated with the hope to obtain different results that will change bitter situations of decadence and dehumanization. Kourouma's use of sarcasm, irony, repetition and antiphony to project the absurdity of such a traditionalistic approach to religion can be found nearly at the turn of every page of *Allah is Not Obligated*.

It does not seem to be the case that the author is rejecting religion on the grounds that people who play various roles in the narrative are unable to offer convincing proofs of the existence of God. Rather he ridicules their tendency to do the same thing over and over again hoping that the result would be different by each repetition. In many communities in Africa, the existence of God is a foregone conclusion and whether people search for proofs in theory or practice, their search tends to be "more *explanatory* than *justificatory*" (Clayton 2006, 80, authors' italics). The title Kourouma chose for his narrative is a stropped critique of an uncritical explanation of why people continue to practice their religion in the midst of so much absurdity. This approach is different from western philosophical and sociological approaches to the study of religion.

Reason, religion, and development in Africa

Several studies have called for the need to factor religion and religious resources into the development strategies of African states (ter Haar & Ellis 2006; Awuah-Nyamekye 2012). However, less attention has been given to the real risk of the abuse of religion. Like any other institution, religion is double-edged and Kourouma succeeds in pointing out that

religion in excess may not necessarily be religion in quality, particularly regarding how individuals and collectives may want to functionalize religion for purposes of power, wealth, and prestige. It would seem that Kourouma is asking for a second look at the contribution religion can make to social development in Africa if the type of religion envisaged is devoid of circumspection.

The point is that, regarding the role of religion in development too, Kourouma's approach sustains rather than dismisses the tension between religion and reason. For example, in the midst of a narrative of dire scarcity and famine, in which we are repeatedly reminded about the absurdity of superstition, Kourouma comes up with the brave paradoxical statement: "Allah never leaves empty a mouth he has created" (2006, 36). This may be a rhetorical expression of faith in divine providence and, by extension, the place of religion in human survival and development. But even here, there is the tongue in cheek figure when one recalls that the author of this statement of faith is a renegade *grigriman* (sorcerer), who made a rather fictitious living off religion.

As a result of his infamous dealings in Abidjan, and the need to escape the grips of the police, Yacouba changed his name to Tiécoura. He had to go into hiding because he had impersonated as a money multiplier and kept stolen money brought to him by criminals. He also defrauded over-enthusiastic believers, who wanted the easiest means to become rich. When the police, upon a tip-off, raided Yacouba's house, they "found lots and lots of suitcases full of stolen money, [but] Yacouba-alias-Tiécoura wasn't home" (Kourouma 2006, 36). After this escape,

Yacouba never went back home. He left Abidjan in the middle of the night and aliased his name to Tiécoura and spent all his time hiding in Togobal where everybody who saw him said they hadn't seen him.

Yacouba still believed, even said out loud, Allah never leaves empty a mouth he has created. (36)

Indeed, Allah may not want to leave anyone he has created hungry; however, Kourouma raises a muted but pertinent question as to whether Allah "fills" the mouth he creates in the style of Yacouba. The claim to divine providence itself becomes foul by virtue of the character and disposition of the claimant. Thus, professing faith in divine providence becomes a forceful innuendo for the real risk of the abuse of religion in the search for survival and for social and economic development.

One of the roles frequently assigned religion in development is its contribution to peace and moral responsibility. Yet in the world of *Allah is Not Obligated*, religion is elicited not for peace, but for violence and the morally depraved seem to benefit of religious/divine protection. This role

capsizal naturally causes confusion and incredulity. We find illustrations of this point too dotted across the novel. But one example is the narrative of Birahima about how the capital of the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO), one of the warring factions, was surprised one night by bandits who killed a number of child-soldiers. Birahima was at this time engaged as a child-soldier for ULIMO. It was believed that the child-soldiers could not be killed by bullets, since they had been placed under a charm by Yacouba. So why did the grigris not work? An explanation was needed and Yacouba came up with one. It was because the child-soldiers had gone against one of the taboos of the grigris by smoking hash at the wrong time. This, in the view of Birahima, was a most irrational and annoying explanation, since it was known to all that child-soldiers did nothing other than smoke hash the whole time! In Birahima's words, this explanation only revealed that "Grigrimen are charlatans" (Kourouma 2006, 110).

To reactivate the amulets that would protect the child-soldiers against gun-shots, a whole day was spent on elaborately bizarre rituals. Birahima and some of his friends flatly disbelieve and privately scorn these ritual processes. Yet, at the end of it all, Tete Brulée is suddenly overcome with bravado, braves the storm through enemy machine gun-fire while returning fire, and succeeds in routing the foe. At this point, Birahima is surprised and clearly articulates his mixed composure of disbelief and confusion as follows:

It was about this time that I realized 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. *Tete Brulée* with his grigris had just taken Nianbo! 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. (118)

Birahima's confusion is symptomatic of the role of religion in peace building and peace mediation. Conflicts in Africa as in other places are known to have religious undercurrents in which religion is harnessed as a resource to determine the fortunes of war. Frequently, religion comes handy for energizing combatants metaphysically rather than disposing them to pacifism in consequence of their religious commitments.

Conclusion

There is enough evidence that contrary to modernist expectations, religion is experiencing some tenacity. In Africa, religion is alive and even plentiful. It manifests mainly in Traditional, Christian and Islamic forms, though

scholars agree that contemporary African Christianity is heavily influenced by African Traditional Worldviews (Bediako 1995; Larbi 2001). African Christianity and, to some extent, Islam in Africa, are discontinuities of African Traditional Religions to the extent that they demonize Traditional religious rituals, ritualists, personal and impersonal spirits and divinities. Yet, paradoxically, African Christianity at the same time endorses African religious worldviews and traditions and provides remarkable continuity and resurgence of African traditional spiritualities such as manifested, for example, in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian traditions (Kalu 2008). This resurgence of religion sometimes blinds scholars to continue “the invention of tradition” (Platvoet and Rinsum 2003) began by pioneer African scholars such as Mbiti in the study of religion in Africa. However, in recent times, the tradition of Africa as being incurably religious has been held up for reconsideration.

Platvoet and Rinsum (2003), for example, have reviewed this tradition, which seeks to define African cultural and social identity from the purview of its religiosity and found that it lacks both logical validity as well as empirical support. They conclude that Africa is neither more nor less religious than other cultures, say Europe, which is usually the point of comparison. Wiredu, the Ghanaian philosopher, has argued that the tradition of incurable religiosity needs to be considered in practical terms as excessive religion or supernaturalism. Similar to the concerns of Kourouma about the type of religion exercised in the world of *Allah is Not Obligated*, Wiredu (1980, 1) accuses traditions of Africa for holding societies in the evils of “anachronism,” “authoritarianism,” and “supernaturalism.” In the view of Wiredu, these *isms* make African societies static and underdeveloped.

Supernaturalism closely translates what Kourouma depicts as irrational religion and which he artistically depicts to be a tool of exploitation and dehumanization. The African literalist who shares Wiredu's position more closely is p'Bitek (1971), particularly because both scholars do not hide their western scientific and functionalist analysis of religion in Africa. Both p'Bitek and Wiredu are thus on the opposing side of Mbiti's “invention” of the notoriety of religion in Africa. They call for a review of Mbiti's position and a deconstruction of the ideology that has developed around it (Platvoet and Rinsum 2003).

Kourouma deals with similar concerns about religion in Africa, but unlike Wiredu and p'Bitek, his approach is more picaresque (Gray 2013) than philosophical. In view of the risks and negativities of practicing religion without circumspection, Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* is, among other things, a narrative ethic of religion. It calls for an intra-cultural re-reading of the popular and academic traditions that promote the value

of overwhelming religion in Africa without developing an equally strong discourse of the misuse and unexamined practice of religion. This interpretation of Kourouma's narrative finds sufficient illustration within the text. By choosing the eyes and voice of an unschooled child-soldier, Kourouma succeeds in painting the image of excessive religion in a context of deprivation and pauperization.

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