


## Troubled West African Childhood and Child Soldiering in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is not Obliged*

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### ABSTRACT

Ahmadou Kourouma's Francophone West African novel *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000) may be reckoned as the earliest denouncement of child soldiering practice. The text came on French literary scene in 2000. Its English translation by Frank Wynne appeared in 2006 and the novel became known to the English world. Since its publication, the novel has garnered much attention from the literary scholars. Kourouma's text describes the disastrous coming-of-age of Birahima who receives uneven development due to unhealthy African conditions. The present analysis of Kourouma's text seeks to understand the stunted psychological, moral and social growth of Birahima in war conditions. His process of formation (actually deformation) can render the course of the development of the child soldiers in Africa. It can be said that Birahima's character is affected by unfavourable familial, social and political conditions of West Africa. This leads him towards his moral aberration, and he has to become a child soldier. Being drug addicted, he kills many innocent people.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial condition, child soldiering, stunted growth, civil war.

African Civil Wars that took place during the 1980s and 1990s forced huge population of African children to become child soldiers or small soldiers. As a consequence, much academic investigation began to centre on the issue of 'child soldiering' from different disciplines over the last two decades. In their methodical study 'The Psychological impact of Child Soldiering'(2010), Elizabeth Schaur and Thomas Elbert affirm that an estimated 30 million children had been affected by armed civil war conflicts and human rights violation during the 1990s and the 2000s (314). Through the analysis of the interviews of child soldiers and commanders, the study has identified reasons that make innocent children participate in these

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conflicts. They are the development of lightweight weapons, large population of children in poor countries, children's fearlessness and will to fight and children as cheap human resource (316). It is also noted that these children are easily indoctrinated, as they are more malleable and adaptable (ibid).

The chaotic circumstances created by the troubled West African political conditions inspired creative minds to write child soldier narratives out of humanitarian considerations. The literary texts like Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* (2000), Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* (2002) and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) are the examples of this type of narratives. These narratives deeply reflect on the issue of child soldiering and its social and psychological effects on the child soldiers. Akin Adesokan argues that the child soldier narrative is the outcome of 'the continent's complicated wars, which are in turn produced by perennial struggles with natural resources, the international arms trade, and a modern history of unequal ethnic and social relations' (Adesokan 12).

In this vein, Ahmadou Kourouma's Francophone West African novel *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000) may be reckoned as the earliest denouncement of child soldiering practice. The text came on French literary scene in 2000. Its English translation by Frank Wynne appeared in 2006 and the novel became known to the English world. Kourouma wrote the novel when the former child soldiers from Somalian war requested him to write a story about child soldiering to censure the inhumane practice pervaded across the continent (Ourdan 74). Since its publication, the novel has garnered much attention from the literary scholars. While attacking Ahmadou Kourouma's text and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), Akin Adesokan holds that these novels substantiate the cultural prejudices and negative image of Africa which already exists in the minds of the westerners (13). Also John Walsh looks at Kourouma's text through the generic prism of bildungsroman in postcolonial conditions of Africa. He maintains that the present is the novel of 'miseducation' (190). He further contends that Kourouma deforms the nature of African bildungsroman. Besides this, Kourouma's text describes the disastrous coming-of-age of Birahima who receives uneven development due to unhealthy African conditions.

The present analysis of Kourouma's text seeks to understand the stunted psychological, moral and social growth of Birahima in war conditions. His process of formation (actually deformation) can render the course of the development of the child soldiers in Africa. It can be

said that Birahima's character is affected by unfavourable familial, social and political conditions of West Africa. This leads him towards his moral aberration and he has to become a child soldier. Being drug addicted, he kills many innocent people.

Birahima's short life until his pubescence is divided into two halves. The first half is about his family and village life at Togobala. In this phase, as a school dropout, he is a street kid. However, the second half details how he digresses from the healthy path of coming-of-age. It also reveals his deep involvement in the political turbulence of West Africa that affects his entire life as a small soldier. His transformation from what he calls himself a 'fearless, blameless kid' of Togobala to a drug addicted child soldier in war affected Liberia and Sierra Leone can be reckoned as a prototype of what it makes and takes to be a child soldier (5).

The very first few pages of the novel clearly elucidate Birahima's deformation as a child soldier. It is evident in his use of Malinke swearing. He admits in the beginning of the text:

I don't swear like the civilized Black Nigger African natives in their nice suits, I don't say fuck! shit! bitch! I use Malinke swear words like faforo! (my father's cock—or your father's or somebody's father's), gnamakode! (bastard), walahe! (I swear by Allah). (2).

While shocking the reader through his confessional tone, the text underlines the real language of a Malinke street kid that makes free use of swear words. The entire narration of Birahima is full of such swear words. Also it reveals the psychology of a pubescent child who is passing through the phase of sexual awakening.

Birahima belongs to Malinke tribe which follows Islam. He does not know his exact age as he says 'I'm maybe ten, maybe twelve (two years ago, grandmother said I was eight, maman said I was ten) and I talk too much' (3). According to his tribal tradition, he is no longer Bilakoro as he is circumcised. His tribal custom confirms that Birahima has come of age and no longer a child. However, in Western perspective, he is just a pubescent child who is in his turbulent phase of life. He is yet to be physically, mentally and socially mature. Due to socio-political conditions, he ends up being an unruly child soldier roaming and risking his life in war affected countries of West Africa.

It may be observed that while delineating the ever-present French lingua-cultural hegemony, Kourouma seeks to explain its effects on the identity formation of the colonial subjects. It can be seen in the beginning of the text itself.

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

Birahima narrates what he calls his 'bullshit story' after experiencing a huge trauma of civil war (1). It also evinces Birahima's acceptance of his self as what he calls 'a little nigger'. He is aware that it is not because of his racial identity as black that makes him little nigger but his lack of ability to speak French. The cultural hegemony of French language becomes a part of hegemonic consciousness of Birahima. Kourouma keeps emphasizing this fact throughout the narrative by placing four dictionaries in Birahima's hands that explain French and Malinke terms to the readers. He narrates the brutal realities of the chaotic West Africa infected by civil wars through the skilled use of dictionaries: the Larousse, the Petit Robert, the Glossary of French Lexical Peculiarities in Black Africa and the Harrap's. Kourouma relates Birahima's failed coming-of-age with the chaos of the African banana republics.

Also, it can be argued that Birahima's family fails to propel him to the healthy path of development. It does not play any constructive role in his growth as a rational being, as his father dies during Birahima's infancy. His mother Bafitini, whom he calls Ma, has also her own physical hardships as she suffers from ulcer. She has her 'right leg amputated and crippled by the ulcer' (6). Hence, she is also unable to rear him like any other ordinary mother. Through Birahima's mother's character, Kourouma reveals the failure of the state to provide healthy conditions to its subjects. Also, he condemns the cruel African custom of female circumcision. Stressing the fatality that may cause due to the female circumcision, Kourouma rejects the practice. Birahima informs about his mother's female circumcision while saying: "they cut something out of my mother, but unfortunately maman's blood didn't stop, it kept gushing like a river swollen by a storm' (14). Kourouma seems to mock the West African perspective to look at female circumcision.

That meant maman was the one who was to die at the place of excision. That's the way of the world, the price that has to be paid. Every year at the ceremony of excision, the djinn of the forest takes one of the girls who has come to be initiated and kills her for a sacrifice. The girl is buried there in the forest. The djinn never chooses an ugly girl, it always picks one of the most beautiful, one of the prettiest of the girls to be initiated. Maman was the prettiest girl of her age, that's why the djinn chose her to die in the forest (14).

She epitomizes one of those African girls who have to go through the difficult passage of becoming African woman.

Also it can be said that she stands metaphorically for mother Africa who has been unable to nourish its people and who has been wounded and diseased by tribal civil wars. Kourouma suggestively describes her through Birahima's words as 'maman moved on her arse like a caterpillar in fits and starts ('fits and starts' means stopping suddenly and then starting again) (7). His description of Bafitini's lost beauty seems to underline the lost beauty of the continent of Africa. The description goes on:

Grandmother and Balla always said she was pretty as a gazelle, pretty as a gourou mask. I only ever got to see her lying down or crawling around on her arse, I never saw her standing, but I knew she must have been charming beautiful, because even after thirty years of shit and stink, of smoke from the hearth and suffering and tears, there was still something beautiful about the lines on her face (11).

His mother's disease can be seen affecting normal growth of her child. Birahima's mother's diseased life and eventual death brings psychological decay of Birahima. He expresses his feelings in this way: 'And I had been a horrible, cruel son to her. I hurt maman, and she died with that hurt in her heart. That's why I'm cursed and the curse goes with me wherever I go. Gnamakode!' (25). After his mother's death, he never seems to be under the moral burden of his family and culture. He clears this when he says: 'But I don't give two fucks about village customs anymore, 'cos I've been in Liberia and killed lots of guys with an Ak-47...' (3). Hence, as an orphan reared by his grandmother, he becomes a wayward street kid who never comes to terms with his family, culture and society. It marks the beginning of his uneven development in the failed nation state.

The second important thing that affects his coming-of-age is his ideas about education. Apparently, he has a distorted pubescent perception of education that stems out of his societal beliefs. Therefore, while denouncing education out rightly, Birahima says:

Number two...I didn't get very far at school. I gave up in my third year in primary school. I chucked it because everyone says education's not worth an old grandmother's fart any more... Education isn't worth an old grandmother's fart anymore, because nowadays even if you get degree you've got no hope of becoming a nurse or a teacher in some fucked-up French speaking banana republic (2).

He internalizes this pessimistic attitude of his society towards education. Consequently, he attends neither French nor Quranic School. Therefore, his transformation as an educated rational native African is hindered. Hence, his life in Togobala represents a typical African village life believing in witchcraft, spirits and animism which, according to Adesokan,

reinforces the negative images of life at the heart of “African darkness” (13). It renders him a wrong perception of the reality around him that leads Birahima to what Walsh says ‘a journey of “miseducation” defined by violence, drugs and death’ (191). Birahima grows with tribal belief system and Islamic teachings which may not be understood in Western perspective. His smooth interpellation to both of these West African realities is evident in the text. For instance, when he undergoes the tribal ceremony of circumcision, he says ‘It’s really painful, but that’s the Malinke tradition’ (29). Or it can be observed in his belief in African idea of life before life:

Before I was crawling around on all fours, I was in maman’s belly. And before that, I could have been the wind, or may be a snake or maybe water. You’re always something like a snake, or a tree or an animal or a person before you get born. It’s called life before life, I lived life before life. Gnamakode! (5).

His firm belief in Islam that he inherits from his mother and grandmother is also evident when he says over and over again in the text: ‘Allah is not obliged to be fair about all things he does here on earth’ (1) or ‘Allah can do whatever he feels like’ (13). Subsequently, Birahima grows with the mixed ideologies of Islam and paganism. By explicating minute details of African Malinke culture and its postcolonial situation after decolonization, Kourouma attempts ‘to be authentically African’ (Ouedraogo et al 1338). However, it uncovers the irrational and unscientific realities of subsistence of West Africans like Birahima who lack logic and rationalism. Kourouma describes both warlords and child soldiers during the tribal war relying much on what they call grigris which are supposed to protect them from bullets. He informs that these warlords hired effective grigrimen during the war. However, as a school dropout, Birahima never understands the mystery around the grigri during the war as a child soldier. When Tete Brulee, one of the fellow child soldiers with his courage and grigris, conquers the village of Niangbo, it confuses him. His helplessness to know the truth about grigri is evident when he says:

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 could not make head or tail of people or society. Tete Brulee with his grigris had just taken Niangbo! 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! (118).

His frustration and confusion regarding paganism can easily be seen in the above quote. He cannot make out the irrationality behind the use of grigri due to his lack of education, his unripe age and trauma of the war. His malleable mind does not get educated and tends to get identified

with the absurd beliefs of his society. Birahima's simplifications of the Malinke terms like evil spell Korote, evil curse djibo, grigris and shadows of dead people gnamas project African irrational animist world. By exposing these realities of West African society in the text, Kourouma seems to do away with 'whatever shortcomings or faults society presents in their realities' (Ouedraogo et al 1347). Kourouma's stand on these aspects of his society is fair as he hides nothing that is wrong in his society. He attacks these irrational notions prevalent in his society and shows what happens to a childlike Birahima who grows in such social conditions. Hence, it may be said that his lack of education is one of the foremost reasons for his stunted growth.

In the second half of the text, Birahima's narration becomes more political than personal as he begins to describe the political events in the war affected Liberia and Sierra Leone. It seems that Birahima's pubescent narrative voice is mixed with Kourouma's detailed authorial knowledge of the civil war that surfaces in the narration. This may be seen as the flaw in the narrative of Kourouma. However, it details the political events and the struggle between the rebel factions, the Liberian and Sierra Leonean government forces and UN peacekeeping forces. The text makes frank use of real historical figures such as Samuel Doe, Prince Johnson, Foday Sankoh and other real rebel organizations. Kourouma exposes anti-democratic and anti-humanitarian truth of the West African barbaric rule during the civil war. These people were more prone to achieve the political power and to get control over natural resources than any nationalist and patriotic considerations.

Birahima is contingently transported from bad conditions of village Togobala to the dystopic conditions of tribal war affected region of West Africa. Though he leaves his village in order to search for his aunty Mahan, his voluntary wish to be a child soldier may be identified the pubescent craving to imitate what adults are allowed to do. It is evident in the following text:

Small soldiers had every-fucking-thing. They had AK-47s. AK-47s are Kalashnikov guns invented by the Russians so you can shoot and keep shooting and never stop. With AK-47s the small-soldiers got every-fucking-thing. They had money, they even had American dollars. They had shoes and stripes and radios and helmets and even cars that they call four-by-fours. I shouted *Walahe! Walahe!* I want to go to Liberia. Right now this minute. I want to be a child soldier, a small soldier (37).

There is complete absence of moral sense in Birahima. What he allures towards is the potential pleasure that child soldiering seems to promise him. He has no capacity to use reason and logic and has a blurred vision about what is right and wrong. Being in his tender age, Birahima is

misled by Yacouba, a grigiman who remains with him throughout Birahima's misfortunes. It is essential to cite what Schaur and Elbert assert about child soldiering:

Motivations for child recruitment include children's limited ability to assess risks, feelings of vulnerability and shortsightedness...From a different perspective, becoming a fighter may seem an attractive possibility for children and adolescent who are facing poverty, starvation, unemployment and ethnic and political persecution' (311).

This shortsightedness makes Birahima more vulnerable and he becomes a child soldier. What worsens his life further is that he gets addicted to drugs like hash. He shares his experience of smoking hash for the first time. 'The first time I smoked hash, I puked like a sick dog, but after a while I got used to it and soon it made me strong as a grown-up. Faforo! (47). The act of smoking hash reflects Birahima's pubescent risk taking behaviour that is usually found in children. The instance substantiates Birahima's wayward journey towards addiction that affects his coming-of-age. However, while justifying his act of becoming a child soldier, Birahima persuasively says:

when you haven't got no father, no mother, no brothers, no sisters, no aunts, no uncles, when you haven't got nothing at all, the best thing to do is become a child soldier' (114).

Once again, Kourouma seems to blame the state for its failure to protect its children and the adults. Hence, it may be said that Birahima's lack of parentage and education, his state of being a street kid, his addiction to drugs and his unhealthy societal surrounding coerce him to be a child soldier.

Birahima's description of Papa le Bon's child soldier makes it clear how the children who are not fit for the soldier's job are forcefully recruited for the tribal wars.

Kids about this tall...as tall as officer's cane. Child-soldiers showing off, their kalashes, their AK-47s, slung over their shoulders, all dressed in para-uniforms. All dressed in parachute gear way too big for them, so uniforms are falling down round their knees, and they're swimming in them (46-47).

The sight of such child soldiers certainly proves that they are forced to accept the adult roles. As Birahima serves as a child soldier in the war-infected countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone, he goes on to become a freelance child soldier who joins different factions of rebel group in Liberia and Sierra Leone. He works for the rebel faction like Charles Taylor's NPFL, Samuel Doe's ULIMO and Foday Sankoh's RUF. His observations give insights about the military coups, cruelties of misrule of warlords to have control over mineral resources, West African anti-democratic rule and its consequent human rights violation of the children and adults of West Africa alike.



While explaining how these child soldiers are indoctrinated, Kourouma explains a tribal war term ‘the young lycaeons of the revolution’ (173). Birahima explains it as ‘the child soldiers who are given the most inhuman jobs’ (173). To become a young lycaeon of the revolution, one has to kill one’s own parents. Kourouma points out the process through which children are made extremely cruel. Because Birahima is an orphan, when he learns that he cannot become the young lycaeons, he regrets:

I could not join the elite child-soldiers, the young lycaeons. I wasn’t entitled to the double rations of food, loads of drugs, the triple salary of the young lycaeons. I was useless, a nobody (175).

Birahima’s perception of his own existence as being useless comes out of his distorted and failed moral development. It is his perverse understanding of the reality around him that makes him crueler.

Birahima faces these realities of West Africa and experiences the trauma of the war. His narration is full of shocking description of diseases, bloodshed, murders, rapes, mutilations, emasculations and amputations of innocent people. For instance, the killing of Sarah by Tete Brulee is described in the text. As she is fatally wounded, she is left alone to die slowly. Birahima describes it: ‘alone beside the tree with all her blood and all her wounds...The army ants and the vultures would make a real feast of her’ (83). Also he minutely describes how cruelly Samuel Doe is killed by Prince Johnson. After captivating Samuel Doe, Johnson tortures him to extremes. Birahima describes it:

The more the blood flowed, the more Johnson laughed, the more delirious he became. Prince Johnson ordered that Samuel Doe’s fingers be cut off, one by one, and with torture victim squealing like a suckling calf, he had his tongue cut out. Through the torrent of blood, Johnson hacked at the arms, one after the other. When he tried to hack off the left arm, the victim had had enough: he gave up the ghost (‘give up the ghost’ means ‘die’) (133).

Further his heart was removed and made a delicious kebab. These encounters with the most inhumane practice of cannibalism have negative impacts on his psyche. These experiences render him a severe trauma that permanently damages his psyche. It may be identified in his confession:

I’m not some cute kid on account of how I’m hunted by the gnamas of lots of people. (Gnamas is a complicated black African Native word that I need to explain so French People can understand. According to the Glossary, a gnama is the shadow of a person that remains after death. The shadow becomes an immanent malevolent force which stalks anyone who has killed an innocent victim.) And I killed lots of innocent victims over in Liberia and Sierra Leone where I was a child doing tribal warfare, and where I got fucked-up on lots of hard drugs. The gnamas of the innocent people I killed are stalking me, so my whole life and everything round me is fucked. Gnamakode (4).

In the above instance, it may be observed that Birahima repents the actions he performed as a child soldier. It provides Birahima's African animist perception to look at his own psychological condition. However, it also hints at his debilitating mental health after he goes through the severe mental trauma of the tribal war. The horrifying war brutalities and atrocities bring traumatic stress on Birahima's mind which is already grimly affected by his mother's death. Hence, it may be said that Birahima's war experiences stunt social and psychological growth of Birahima.

Kourouma puts some parallel life stories of other child soldiers in the narrative as well. Through the child soldiers like Sarah, Captain Kik, Tete Brulee, and many others, Kourouma tries to find out the social and psychological reasons of child soldiering. Their stories reveal their regression in their development due to uneven familial, social and political conditions of their African society. However, by the examples of Birahima's two cousins Saydou and Mamadou, he shows his optimism. He suggests that being hailed from the same socio-political conditions, Saydou and Mamadou find different course of life. Saydou becomes a criminal and Mamadou, a doctor (205). By these examples, Kourouma wants to suggest his optimism, though West Africa is devastated by this political turbulence.

In conclusion, it may be said that Birahima and other child soldiers go through the process of becoming man in the West African dystopia. Due to the war conditions, they have to be a small soldier or a child soldier. They have to accept adult jobs as a soldier and kill innocent people. Consequently, the traumatic experiences of civil war result into their warped coming-of-age. They fail to achieve their normal adulthood. Kourouma puts African dystopia through the present text. By uncovering the West African realities, 'Afro-optimist' Kourouma envisions Africa as a perpetual abode of healthy and peaceful democracy (Ourdan 74).

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