

EXPRESSING TRUTH THROUGH FICTION AND ORALITY THROUGH LITERACY:
NARRATIVE VOICES IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN LITERATURE

by

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(Under the Direction of Rachel Gabara)

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Francophone African authors use techniques borrowed from orality to express African perspectives on history. Following years of colonization and racism, during which their voices were muted, African authors felt a need to express their own perspective on their experiences. Incorporating themes, stylistic qualities, or situations from African oral literature, through implicit and explicit references, these authors use their works to valorize an African culture and way of life while not hesitating to offer criticism as well. Orality affects the narration and substance of the novels, contributing to their distinctness and emphasizing their African perspectives on historic events. Outside sources, including anthropological studies, are used to contextualize and better understand the works. I focus on four different narrative voices: the griot's voice, the woman's voice, the child's voice, and a plurality of voices. The griot's voice in *Le Maître de la parole* by Laye Camara, *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue* by Djibril Tamsir Niane, and *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba* by Birago Diop emphasizes the importance of Africa's rich traditions and orality. The woman's voice as expressed in Mariama Bâ's *Une Si Longue Lettre* and Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* points out the cruelty of that tradition towards those who hold little power in society. The child's

voice found in *L'Aîné des orphelins* by Tierno Monémbo, *Allah n'est pas obligé* by Ahmadou Kourouma, and *Johnny Chien Méchant* by Emmanuel Dongala reinforces the need for a connection to the past when looking forward. The final chapter focuses on two novels by Ahmadou Kourouma: *Les Soleils des indépendances* and *Monnè, outrages et défis*. In these novels Kourouma uses a plurality of narrators to tell the stories, allowing the reader to see different points of view on African history which leads to a broader understanding of an African perspective. The use of multiple voices in these texts highlights non-Western modes of understanding and validates an African perspective.

INDEX WORDS: Francophone African literature, Orality, Historical fiction, Narrative voice, Laye Camara, Djibril Tamsir Niane, Birago Diop, Mariama Bâ, Fatou Diome, Tierno Monémbo, Ahmadou Kourouma, Emmanuel Dongala.

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DEDICATED TO

My parents James and Beverly Hubbard

My grandfather Charles L. Hubbard

My husband Lamarana Baldé

Our children Alim and Lia

And to the people of Kankalabé in Guinea, West Africa

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 PUTTING WORDS ON PAPER: CAPTURING THE GRIOT’S VOICE	17
3 SUBVERTING ORALITY: FINDING THE WOMAN’S VOICE.....	46
4 EXPRESSING LOSS: THE CHILD’S VOICE.....	77
5 EXPOSING THE TRUTH: INTERPRETING PLURAL VOICES	115
6 CONCLUSION.....	170
REFERENCES	175

1. INTRODUCTION

Before the colonization of sub-Saharan Africa by Europeans, rich traditions of oral literature and history abounded on the continent. These traditions, which represent the heritage of today's African authors, have intrigued outsiders almost from their first contact with them. Western scholars have studied and recorded African epics, poetry, myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, even riddles and jokes. Nevertheless, this oral literature has not always been understood or properly respected. As Isidore Okpewho notes, "The high period of ethnological research in Africa coincided with the period of European colonial activity, and some of the great ethnologists of that generation were colonial administrators: Roscoe in Uganda, Rattray in the Gold Coast (Ghana), Talbot in Nigeria" (8). Ethnographers affiliated with the colonial system saw Africans as inferior and sought to bring culture (in the sense of European civilization) to a "primitive" race of people. African oral literature suffered at the hands of these early scholars: "Apart from reducing the texts to bare summaries which contained mainly what were considered the essential points, the scholars also took the liberty to edit the texts so as to get rid of material they considered 'unclean' by European standards" (Okpewho 9). This summarizing and cleansing of texts led to the loss of their uniqueness as the voices of the oral performers were muted.

When Africans began to write in European languages, they had a lot to prove. They needed to present an African perspective on the history of their continent. They needed to show through their writing that African literature was not inferior to Western literature. In addition,

they needed to set the record straight about African oral literature by portraying it in all its particularity. Because of a troubled recent past of colonialism, slavery, and racism, it is all the more urgent that African perspectives be understood and African voices be heard. Historical fiction written in French provides an entertaining and informative way to bring those perspectives and voices to the attention of an international audience. While creating fictional narratives African authors often have something to say about history – African history – from an African point of view and they have chosen to highlight the African character of their works by incorporating themes and structures into the narrative that point back to the orality of traditional African societies. In this way the fictional narrative, infused with orality, approaches history from uniquely African perspectives, finding a way to express orality through literacy and truth through fiction.

History

Before proceeding with an analysis of individual Francophone novels that demonstrate this expression of orality through literacy and of truth through fiction, let us take a look at some critical works which address the key theoretical concepts of this study, beginning with history. Roland Barthes' essay "Le discours de l'histoire" sheds some light on the term "history". While it is commonly held that one can place more confidence in the accuracy of the historical material presented in a history book than in a work of fiction, Barthes proposes that, in fact, there is little to differentiate between the two types of narrative. He opens his essay with this question:

La narration des événements passés, soumise communément, dans notre culture, depuis les Grecs, à la sanction de la « science » historique, placée sous la caution impérieuse du « réel », justifiée par des principes d'exposition « rationnelle »,

cette narration diffère-t-elle vraiment, par quelque trait spécifique, par une pertinence indubitable, de la narration imaginaire, telle qu'on peut la trouver dans l'épopée, le roman, le drame ? (417)

Barthes goes on to demonstrate that historians, much like novelists, reveal themselves (and their biases) by way of various types of markers found throughout the texts. Embedded within the historians' discourse, Barthes identifies what he calls "le *shifter* d'écoute"; that is, any mention of sources, witnesses, or gathering of information from other places; and "le *shifter* d'organisation", how the historian organizes the discourse in time, moving forward evenly and chronologically or not, covering periods of the same amount of time with the same amount of space on the page or not (418). These markers and others show that the historian cannot be truly objective, despite all attempts to remove him- or herself from the narrative. The historian's choices influence the history he or she portrays. It becomes clear that history is written like fiction, with a narrative aspect.

Another problem that presents itself is the juxtaposition of the real with the imaginary. Historical discourse is dependent on language, and language, Barthes shows, is not "real" (425). A historian, seeking to explain history, assembles and orders the information available to him or her and, in so doing, transforms it from fact to fiction. Barthes explains, "le discours historique est essentiellement élaboration idéologique, ou, pour être plus précis, *imaginaire*" (425). In the attempt to *express* what is real, historical discourse *replaces* what is real, pushing aside the actual events it seeks to describe. Barthes elaborates, "En d'autres termes, dans l'histoire « objective », « le réel » n'est jamais qu'un signifié informulé, abrité derrière la toute puissance apparente du référent" (426). It is therefore impossible to write a historical narrative that would be completely factual and objective. The act of recounting history in an understandable and ordered way

destroys it. Barthes concludes, “la narration historique meurt parce que le signe de l’Histoire est désormais moins le réel que l’intelligible” (427). Barthes’ analysis shows that one cannot expect to find complete objectivity in a historical work just as one could not expect to find it in a work of fiction. In both cases the author is necessarily subjective while language necessarily intervenes and distorts.

More recent critics have also treated the question of historical discourse. In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White builds on Barthes’ ideas as he focuses on the relation between narrative discourse and historical representation. As he states in his preface:

The relation becomes a problem for historical theory with the realization that narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspect as developmental processes but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications. (ix)

White explains that historians have a desire to give to real events the form of a story, to “narrativize” and that the public demands this story form rather than lists of events or stacks of historical documents (2). In fact, according to official wisdom, “[an] account remains something less than a proper history if [the historian] has failed to give to reality the form of a story” (5). This becomes a problem because the historian’s narrativization of events means that they are not recorded in the order of their original occurrence, but in an order of narrative. The change in order demonstrates that there is already more than one version of the events. White states, “Unless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for the historian to take upon himself the authority of giving the true account of what really happened”

(20). A narrativized history is always just one version of two or more possible versions of what happened, although this does not mean that all versions are equally justified or justifiable.

In addition, a narrativized history needs to have a conclusion. The chronicle type of historical representation, common in the Middle Ages, is not considered to be a proper history precisely because it lacks this conclusion and simply ends abruptly. White explains, “The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand, I suggest, for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama”

(21). He goes on to say:

Where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present too. There is no other way that reality can be endowed with the kind of meaning that both displays itself in its consummation and withholds itself by its displacement to another story “waiting to be told” just beyond the confines of “the end.” (24)

A narrative doesn't just stop, it concludes by looking back at the start, tying up loose ends, and drawing a lesson (implicitly or explicitly) from the events. Real life isn't like that, it keeps moving on and new things keep happening, but a story must end. While we may take the narrativization of history for granted, it has become clear that this process of transforming historical records or observations into a narrative does not happen without having an impact on the events being described, creating multiple versions, and inserting moral judgment. White shows that the inexorable slide of history into narrative distorts it and makes it more easily controlled by those who write it, or who commission its writing.

Yet another take on the unavoidable subjectification of the past by our present, comes from the French school of thought called “nouvelle histoire”, which sprang from the “École des

Annales” in the 1970’s. Led by historians Jacques Le Goff, Pierre Nora, and others, its objective in recording history is to avoid a history centered on politics and “great men” (Coutau-Bégarie 214). Rather, it seeks to establish a history of the masses by focusing on demographics, economics, material culture, and mentalities, that is, collective representations of societies (Coutau-Bégarie 127). By taking a stance against a focus on “great men”, nouvelle historians broaden history. They see common people, and how they live their lives, as a much more important aspect of history, the study of which leads to “a spirit of tolerance and responsibility” (Burguière 20). Hervé Coutau-Bégarie describes the appeal of the *École des Annales* as coming from, “leur économisme, leur mépris du politique, leur insistance à faire des masses l’acteur privilégié, sinon unique, de l’histoire” (255). André Burguière describes their motivation as a “possibly naïve desire to escape an overly academic view of history stripped of the meaning of life” (17). By displacing great men with the masses as the focus of history, the *nouvelle histoire* movement gives ordinary people a place of importance in world events.

The African authors in this study make a point of presenting an aspect of African history from a new perspective. Perhaps historical accounts had already been written by colonists and other non-Africans to cover these moments in history, but as Barthes showed, they were certainly biased and subjective and had already transformed fact to fiction. The African authors now take their turn at interpreting history, and do so in their own way. White’s ideas underscore the importance of Francophone novelists’ work of rewriting history. Because history has been used in the past as a way of controlling people, it is important for novelists to rewrite that history from an African perspective. And the *nouvelle histoire* phenomenon, with its focus on the masses rather than on great men as the principal actors in history, helps legitimize a similar focus on ordinary people in the novels to be examined.

Achille Mbembe, a Cameroonian theorist and political scientist, addresses history in the postcolonial system specifically. He defines the postcolony (a society recently issued from the experience of colonization) as having a given historical trajectory in which relationships based on violence persist. He continues:

Mais plus que cela, la postcolonie est une pluralité chaotique, pourvue d'une cohérence interne, de systèmes de signes bien à elle, de manières propres de fabriquer des simulacres ou de reconstruire des stéréotypes, d'un art spécifique de la démesure, de façons particulières d'exproprier le sujet de ses identités. (76)

Mbembe explains that the dictatorial state, which he refers to as the “commandement”, interacts with the people in a way that differs from the classic understanding of oppressor/oppressed (77). While the people mock the vocabulary and practices of the leadership, they also imitate and participate in them. Relationships are reinforced by violence, but there is a logic of conviviality, familiarity and domesticity in which all the players participate (86). It is in this postcolonial environment, often violent and hostile to criticism, that most of the authors included in this study write. Constrained on many counts, they choose nonetheless to write provocative historical novels, to raise questions about colonial and postcolonial systems, and to bring African perspectives to the forefront. By writing novels that deal with moments in history from an African perspective, Francophone novelists are able to express the truth of various situations through fiction.

Orality

Having explained the significance of the term “history” in Francophone literature, let us turn to the term “orality”. Orality refers to a system and way of life that is diametrically opposed to

literacy; it is communication based on the spoken rather than the written word. In the traditional oral societies of sub-Saharan Africa, writing existed only on the margin, as something introduced by foreign invaders. As Okpewho explains, literature was oral, that is, “delivered by word of mouth” (3) and was performed by “accomplished oral artists” (21). The artists and the material they perform vary greatly across Africa; for the purposes of this study, I will focus on orality in West Africa, the center for Francophone literature.

Amadou Koné explains that the oral traditions of West Africa include several different kinds of oral artists and genres. First, there are the men and women of any profession who gather in the evenings to share riddles, fables, and other traditional stories that are open to everyone. Then, there are the elders who constitute the memory of the community, and represent the voice of the past and of the present. They take the floor during large debates and tribunal sessions and often use proverbs to make their arguments (Koné 45). In addition, there are groups of individuals that form at occasions like marriages, naming ceremonies, funerals, and religious manifestations to sing the particular songs associated with each of these circumstances. The oral tradition also manifests itself in songs linked to certain professions: blacksmiths, weavers, hunters, initiation leaders, traditional healers, etc. each wield particular songs and chants (Koné 46). But the real word specialists, the “*maîtres de la parole*”, are performers known in French as *griots*. Called “*farba*”, “*mabô*”, and “*djeli*” by different ethnic groups, only *griots* can recount the sacred legends and the glorious epics that tell of the great heroes of long ago (Koné 47-8). Stephen Belcher further explains *griot*:

The term applies to the musicians and singers of many ethnic groups in French West Africa; their functions resemble the combined roles of minstrel and herald in medieval Europe. Music and song are widely seen as their essential activities, but

griots also fulfill other purposes. They are widely credited with diplomatic skills (the art of the word) and may serve as intermediaries in negotiations; in the past they were the spokesmen for royalty, protecting the majesty of the ruler by isolating him. (8)

So griots are the storytellers, the history keepers, the diplomats, and the spokesmen in an oral society, which would seem to make them very powerful. However, while it is easy to idealize the role of griot, this is somewhat misleading. In West Africa the griots' image is not all positive. They are of a lower social class than the majority population and are often looked down on or feared. As the repositories of family fame, they control social identities and can reveal details about particular families that have the potential to break down marriage or business negotiations. Belcher notes, "This power, as well as the bond that entitles them to ask for (or extort) gifts, makes them doubly disquieting" (12).

Nevertheless, griots remain a powerful connection to the past glory of West African societies and appear in numerous Francophone novels. The two sides of their identity - that of revered oral artist and despised manipulator - are intriguing and a more detailed discussion of them and their role as narrators in written literature is forthcoming in chapter 2. The presence of griots as narrators is just one aspect of many tributes to orality found in the Francophone novels in this study. Okpewho explains why traditional oral literature is important to many African authors today: "Whereas many Europeans treated African culture and everything that came from it as 'primitive' or inferior to their own, the African scholars approached this culture with a feeling of understanding and pride" (12). While it is expected that one would take pride in one's culture and origins, the remarkable thing is how these authors incorporate traditional African values and techniques into a novel written in the French language.

The irony of the situation is striking. Orality and literacy are opposing systems and literacy appears to be winning, even in Africa. The African authors in this study have made a name for themselves in the literary world because they have published works of written literature in French; they have clearly embraced the system that was brought in by foreigners, a system unknown to their ancestors. However, the situation is complex. These African authors have chosen to write books and yet have not abandoned their culture. One cannot accuse them of simply imitating the European novel; instead, they have made the new language and medium their own.

One of the primary ways that African authors have adapted the written novel to their situation is by infusing it with elements from orality. As we examine the individual works, we will see the varied ways in which each author pays tribute to the orality of his or her culture. Incorporating themes, stylistic qualities, or situations from African oral literature, through implicit and explicit references, these authors use their works to valorize an African culture and way of life while not hesitating to offer criticism as well, another hallmark of oral literature. Orality affects the narration and substance of the novels, contributing to their distinctness and emphasizing their African perspectives on historic events.

Varied Voices

It should be noted, however, that there is no single African point of view. The novels selected for this study introduce varied and unique voices into the narration. While “point of view” implies describing something from a certain position in space and time, “voice” requires the identification of who is speaking. Voice is a metaphor which is implicitly plural, as in, one needs to identify not simply the why and the where of the voice, the place from which it is

spoken, but the who, and who implies someone else. The mere fact of identifying a narrative voice implies that there is another voice that might recount the same story differently.

Therefore, this study emphasizes not only an African perspective on history, but also the presence of varied African voices to recount that history. Each of the novels I will examine is narrated with a voice or voices that add(s) depth to the stories being told. As Rosemary Schikora reminds us, “until the relatively recent growth of literacy, African cultures were primarily oral, their vitality depended largely upon the effectiveness of human speech, and, as a consequence, a wealth of verbal art has flourished for centuries in Africa” (811). She explains that voice remains extremely important in African literature. The voice of the storyteller and even the voices of the listeners who are following along make the story what it is.

Context

As this study seeks to emphasize the African perspective that African voices bring to moments in African history, the Western reader is faced with a dilemma. How can an outsider to the culture truly interpret this literature and fully understand what the African perspective might be?

Christopher L. Miller proposes:

A fair Western reading of African literatures demands engagement with, and even dependence on, anthropology. The demonstration of this point begins from the premise that good reading does not result from ignorance and that Westerners simply do not know enough about Africa. (4)

The use of anthropology to interpret literature is not without controversy, especially in Africa. Early ethnographers created distorted images of African culture and oral literature, often based on an underlying racism. But that is perhaps all the more reason to search for rigorous

anthropological studies, written by insiders to the cultures in question whenever possible, in order to understand them at last. And, as Miller points out, the novels themselves already contain anthropological rhetoric – footnotes, parentheses, and in-text explanations – to provide the reader with cultural information. This is necessary as most readers of Francophone African literature are not local due to the limited literacy and knowledge of French throughout the region. Therefore, Miller notes, “A degree of ‘otherness’ is inscribed in any text which addresses itself to a world that is construed as outside” (6). The novelists have already introduced anthropology into their novels and pursuing more in-depth anthropological studies of the cultures they write about is simply taking the next step towards understanding the context of the novels.

The study of anthropology often emphasizes the differences between cultures, and difference can lead to implications of inequality and also to a tendency to exoticism. However, Miller explains his view that the ignorance of difference is unethical and that, rather than glossing over differences to insist on universality, scholars should study difference through dialogue (31). While some say that Africans must choose between equality and identity, Miller holds that, when Westerners use anthropology to aid in reading African literature, an understanding of Africans’ differences, and thus their identity, can be attained while not compromising their fundamental equality.

While Miller emphasizes anthropology specifically, it seems to me that our focus should be on gaining an understanding of the overall context of these Francophone African novels. This can be achieved through the study of a variety of sources, including anthropology, but also history, politics, literature, geography, and more. Knowing more about the context of the novels (including cultural facts and modes of understanding, history of the region, political climate, etc.) will certainly help the Western reader to interpret them more effectively. And this emphasis on

context brings us once again to considerations of the influence of oral literature on the novels. Certainly the orality of traditional African cultures is an important factor in understanding modern African literature.

Overview

The authors making up this study incorporate orality into the narratives they write, which enables them to approach history from African perspectives using African voices. In chapters 2-5 I will apply these ideas to a selection of Francophone African novels, each one representing a unique voice or combination of voices which leads to a new understanding of a moment in history. An examination of these works while bearing in mind the theories I've discussed, and while fostering an understanding of traditional African oral literature, opens them up to new interpretations. Armed with abundant creativity and originality, the authors seek to express truth through fiction and orality through literacy in ways that are as varied as their different works.

In chapter 2, I focus on the griot's voice as represented in two written versions of the epic of *Sunjata* by Djibril Tamsir Niane and Laye Camara as well as Birago Diop's collection of traditional tales: *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba*. I show how the authors acknowledge and validate orality in their works, and I discuss the importance of the griot's voice in providing the work with a unique African perspective. I discuss the paradoxes that present themselves in the conversion of a traditional oral text to a written publication. Key themes of traditional African oral literature include the importance of the spoken word and the importance of secrecy and I discuss how these themes manifest themselves in the written versions. I show how Diop's interpretation of history emphasizes what Africa lost to colonization. And finally, I demonstrate

the importance of context in interpreting the works as a deeper understanding of them requires more knowledge about griots in West African society.

In the chapters that follow, I examine the representations of other voices in modern Francophone literature, moving from the more conventional to the more innovative narrators. In each case I discuss the importance of orality and the way in which it is showcased in the novel. I demonstrate the importance of each of the voices in providing the work with a unique African perspective, discuss the interpretation of history that emerges as a result of that perspective, and show how a deeper understanding of the novel requires more knowledge about its context through the study of anthropology, history, politics, and other sources.

Thus, chapter 3 treats the woman's voice in Mariama Bâ's *Une Si Longue Lettre* and Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, revealing how their interpretation of history emphasizes the difficulties women continue to face in Africa and the ambivalent relationship they have with their culture's traditional orality. Both Bâ and Diome emphasize the opportunities that literacy provides for women. In order to understand why I explore in depth the role women have in traditional West African societies and the role ascribed to them in oral literature. I look at women oral performers and the genres that they perform to understand the voice that they have (or do not have) in traditional society. Bâ and Diome distance themselves from griots by maintaining only the aspects of orality that involve the transmission of proverbs, songs, and stories from woman to woman, teaching them about their heritage and how to cope and be strong in their society. They abandon the role of praise-singer and question the negative or limited role of women that is present in many works from the oral tradition. Their perspective on history emphasizes the cruelty of tradition towards women and the need to find a balance between traditional and western wisdom.

Chapter 4 examines the child's voice in Tierno Monénembo's *L'Aîné des orphelins*, Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé*, and Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Chien Méchant*. These novels narrated by children deal with the lingering after-effects of tragedy and the damage done to the children, and therefore to the future of the country. Each novel gives a heartbreaking account of genocide or civil war through a child's voice. In so doing, the authors emphasize the importance of a traditional oral education and demonstrate the dangers that result from losing one's heritage and one's roots. Because the narrators are children, their understanding of events is imperfect and their perspectives on history are limited, focusing on their own lives. The novels are bleak, but do contain a bit of hope for the future. The answer to tragedy and violence consists of a faithful recording of what happened in the past in order to move forward, and an emphasis on a solid education, both traditional and western.

Finally, chapter 5 will address the use of multiple voices in Ahmadou Kourouma's innovative novels *Les Soleils des indépendances* and *Monnè, outrages et défis*. The author integrates orality into the works by modifying the French language to resemble Malinké and by filling the narration with images and metaphors from oral literature. Through Kourouma's use of multiple narrators and shifting voices, his interpretation of history emphasizes the existence of different versions of events. The use of multiple voices in the narration highlights non-Western modes of understanding and the novels validate an African perspective that is often at odds with the Western one.

In the concluding chapter, having shown how it is important to approach Francophone African literature with a consideration of the author's use of orality, history, and narration while using various outside sources to establish the context and better understand and interpret the works, I discuss the contribution this literature makes to society. The study of Francophone

African literature warrants a dedicated effort of textual interpretation because it provides not only a window into a culture that many readers might otherwise know very little about, but it also reveals universal human truths. I reflect on the effect of the varied narrative voices found in the ten featured novels when taken together.

2. PUTTING WORDS ON PAPER: CAPTURING THE GRIOT'S VOICE

The griot's voice represents a worldview that is quite ancient indeed, from long before the time of colonization, and thus appeals to Francophone African authors as representing a historical viewpoint unlike that of the colonizers. Francophone authors writing in the 50's and 60's, when colonization was still underway, were especially committed to recording excerpts from oral literature in written form, using a griot's voice to narrate. While traditional African society was damaged and debased by colonization, these authors use their works to praise the traditional way of life. They are making a statement about the value of African oral literature and all that it represents, while recognizing that one way to preserve it is by transforming it into written literature. By maintaining a griot as narrator even once a story is written down, these authors try to preserve the oral character of the narrative.

It is significant that authors such as Djibril Tamsir Niane, Laye Camara, and Birago Diop employ not only the griot's point of view, but claim actually to reproduce the griot's voice in their works of literature. By allowing the griot to recount traditional tales in the first person, these authors place a high value on oral literature while making it accessible to a much larger, albeit different, audience. While a significant percentage of the griot's original audience may not be able to read the stories in French, Western readers and educated Africans who are at risk of losing touch with their roots are given the opportunity to "listen in" on a griot retelling a traditional tale.

The process of converting oral literature into written form produces several paradoxes. In oral literature words exist in the memory of a person and can only be transmitted directly from person to person, often changing somewhat in the process. In written literature words exist on paper (or another physical medium). They can be transmitted in time and space without change and without the presence of the author. It is much easier to generate, store, and retrieve complex ideas and information through writing than through orality. Many more oppositions between orality and writing exist, for example, speech has a power that is much more difficult to ignore than the written word. Orality is based on human relationships, but in writing no relationship is necessary. Orality changes based on audience participation, while writing cannot respond to a question or concern. Orality limits communication to those in the same group as oneself, while writing allows for contact between different groups and cultures. Orality maintains pride in one's culture and past, it tends to look backwards. Writing extends human possibilities in thought and action and thus looks forward. Orality tends to be practical, dealing with subjects close to the human world, while in writing any subject is possible. Orality is often passionate, ranging from tongue-lashings to lavish praise, while writing disengages from direct conflict.

The debate over the value of writing versus speech can be traced back to Socrates as recorded by Plato in the *Phaedrus*. He states, “[Writing] will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it, through lack of practice at using their memory, as through reliance on writing they are reminded from outside by alien marks, not from within, themselves by themselves” (275a). Socrates also criticizes writing's inability to respond to questions or criticism (275d-e). He urges for the interaction of active human minds in person and his preference for orality has influenced the values of Western culture to this day.

The oppositions between orality and literacy can be summed up as the opposition of presence and absence. And presence is considered to be a superior form of communication in Western culture. Writing is only secondary: the graphic representation of the phonetic representation of a meaning. However, Jacques Derrida refutes the superiority of orality in *De la grammatologie*. He shows that writing, as a permanent mark that exists without the current presence of a determinable sender or recipient, is what makes language possible (Glendinning 12). Derrida states, “[L’écriture est] la condition de possibilité des objets idéaux et donc de l’objectivité scientifique. Avant d’être son objet, l’écriture est la condition de l’*epistémè*” (42-43). He turns our preconceived notions on their heads by insisting that it is writing that allows language to exist.

What does this mean for Francophone African literature? Derrida’s ideas apply to the Western tradition of which Africa is not a part, however, by pitting writing and orality against each other, he nevertheless provides an interesting backdrop to the challenge of transitioning a piece of literature from oral to written. Writing and orality are competing discourses, each with their own limitations, but Niane, Camara, and Diop want to use writing to express and validate traditional African orality. Their biggest challenge, then, is how to portray the presence of orality through the absence of writing.

One of the most famous examples of oral literature coming out of West Africa is the epic of Sunjata, founder of the empire of Mali.¹ Two accomplished Francophone authors, Djibril Tamsir Niane and Laye Camara, each published a version of Sunjata, as told by different griots. And each insists on his complete dependence on the griot’s voice. Niane states in his

¹ The Empire of Mali in West Africa (c.1230-1545) is the cradle of the Mandingo culture. At its peak its territory included parts of present-day Mali, Guinea, Senegal, Mauritania, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso. Its broad influence on the culture of the peoples of West Africa continues to be a unifying factor to this day.

introduction to *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue*, “Je ne suis qu’un traducteur, je dois tout aux Maîtres de Fadama, de Djeliba Koro et de Keyla et plus particulièrement à Djeli Mamadou Kouyaté, du village de Djeliba Koro, en Guinée” (7). Camara makes a similar claim in *Le Maître de la parole*, stating, “Babou Condé, l’auteur de la légende qui suit – nous n’en sommes que le modeste transcripateur et traducteur – était à la société africaine traditionnelle ce que les imagiers des cathédrales et les peintres primitifs étaient au Moyen Âge européen : un homme que l’idée de signer son œuvre [...] n’effleurait même pas” (29). It is important to both authors to emphasize their simple reproduction of the griot’s voice into a different language and medium, without making other changes.

However, a comparison of these written versions of the Sunjata epic with recordings and the accompanying transcriptions of modern griots performing the same epic reveals that, in fact, Niane and Camara have done much more to adapt the text than simply transcribe and translate. An English version of the West African epic published in 2004 brings to light the changes the earlier versions instituted. *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples* was recorded, edited and translated by David Conrad and narrated by Djanka Tasse Condé (the son of Babou Condé, Camara’s informant). In the introduction Conrad describes Niane’s version as “popular but reconstructed” and explains that the new version is a response to “a long-felt need for a text that is formatted in a reasonable approximation of the original performance values of the narrator, but which is at the same time readily comprehensible to readers previously unfamiliar with Manding cultures and their most definitive oral tradition” (ix). While Niane’s and Camara’s texts are prose narratives, Conrad’s version is presented in verse and includes the interjections of the responders, or *naamu*-sayers. These secondary performers reply to and encourage the bard during his performance with short, interjected comments such as “naamu”

(yes, I hear you), “it’s true”, “I swear”, and “amen” (Conrad xvii). Here is an example of Conrad’s text where the story begins following the griot’s introduction:

You say you want to know about Manden	(Naamu)
For us to give you many details about Manden	(Naamu)
With which part of Manden will we start?	(Naamu)
We will start with Sunjata’s father,	(Naamu)
Who is Farako Manko Farakonken.	(Naamu) (4)

Niane’s version begins quite differently after the griot’s introduction:

Écoutez donc, fils du Manding, enfants du peuple noir, écoutez ma parole,
je vais vous entretenir de Soundjata, le père du Clair-Pays, du pays de la savane,
l’ancêtre de ceux qui tendent les arcs, le maître de cent rois vaincus. (12)

While the responders’ comments have been eliminated and the verse has been rendered into prose, the beginning maintains an oral aspect with the phrase “écoutez ma parole”. This fades however as the narrative takes over and the work becomes more novelistic as it continues.

Camara’s version takes the transformation a step further. It begins with an extensive introduction and background information on the griot, but the story itself is immediately novelistic from its rather abrupt beginning:

Ils étaient deux chasseurs, l’aîné s’appelait Moké Moussa, le cadet, Moké
Dantouman. La colère soudain les souleva. Quoi! dirent-ils, un buffle qui
empêche tout un peuple de vivre en paix et de manger à sa faim?... Nous irons
voir ce buffle. (36)

This comparison allows us to see that in the process of adaptation from oral to written, Niane and Camara also made substantial stylistic changes in their versions of the Sunjata epic. While in

some ways their prose versions are more appealing to a Westerner and are certainly easier to read, some authenticity has been sacrificed. Both authors omitted many of the elements that are typical of a traditional performance such as the repetition, the call-and-response pattern with interjections by the responder, and the griots' personalization of the tale to fit the audience and the occasion. According to Miller, "Niane's *Soundjata* and Camara's *Maître de la parole* are in effect *novelizations*, conveniently packaged, readable texts in which the long recitations, litanies, circumlocutions and repetitions of the oral epic are missing" (90). But even Conrad's written version could not incorporate the use of musical instruments and song, inflections of the voice, gestures, and facial expressions. Some elements had to be sacrificed in the change of medium.²

If changes were necessary in order to convert an oral performance into a successful written work, why hide them from the reader? It seems that the perception of the griot's voice being preserved is more important than a truly authentic reproduction of the epic as the griot would really tell it. Niane and Camara wanted the griot to be seen as the true author of their works in order to make their claims of authenticity. Paradoxically, they needed to adapt the original content in order to create an appealing written version of the epic. Through the balance they strike between authenticity and adaptation, the two authors seek to ensure that the griot's voice, and through it the African oral tradition, are both valorized and made accessible in their works.

Marie Tollerson explains that African authors seeking to reproduce the ancient oral tradition in literature had to accommodate two different publics:

² For these reasons and in order to reach African audiences in their native languages, many Francophone authors have turned to film-making. One of the most notable authors turned film-makers is Ousmane Sembene. The authors in this study however, have taken a different and perhaps more challenging approach, seeking to adapt oral literature into a written format.

One was a small but knowledgeable African body anxious to see its indigenous literature integrated into the literature of the world, yet a body which would be critical of any exotic distortions designed to cater to foreign tastes; the other was a non-African public, highly literate, much in need of a corrected view of Africa, divorced from the ancient oral tradition, and capable only of judging what is written. For this audience, the [...] writers must find a way of capturing the *griot's* art in writing. The problems are immense and not entirely solvable. (86)

Tollerson points out that no writing techniques can make inflections of the voice heard or pantomime seen. The “immediacy and intimacy” shared between a participating audience and a live performer cannot be reproduced on a printed page. And yet, Tollerson insists, the oral and written versions “must be successfully wedded if the authors’ divergent publics were to be satisfied” (82). Niane and Camara both found ways of accomplishing this.

Despite having to make significant changes in the conversion from an oral to a written version of the epic, both authors try to capture some of the oral qualities of the original version. Niane’s novel is occasionally punctuated by the griot’s commentary, as if to remind readers of who is speaking. He begins the story with the griot stating his credentials: “Je suis griot. C’est moi Djeli Mamadou Kouyaté, fils de Bintou Kouyaté et de Djeli Kedian Kouyaté, maître dans l’art de parler” (9). The griot sometimes digresses from the action with interjections like, “Dieu a ses mystères que personne ne peut percer, Tu seras roi, tu n’y peux rien, tu seras malheureux, tu n’y peux rien” (36), “Nous arrivons maintenant aux grands moments de la vie de Soundjata” (78), and “Écoutez maintenant l’histoire de Soundjata, le Na’Kamma ; l’homme qui avait une mission à remplir” (79). Through these interjections, the griot expresses his personal views and comments on the action of the story. They occur just frequently enough to maintain an oral

quality in the retelling of Sunjata and to remind us of who the narrator is: Niane makes it clear in his introduction that he considers Kouyaté to be the “true” author of the work.

Camara’s version does not include this type of interjection, but does contain many instances of Malinké verse inserted into the story:

Itâma kognan Nkôdô Mussoni

i tâma Kognan ikana bila gbangban dô

Marche doucement ma-petite-grande-sœur!

Marche doucement, que tu ne te couvres de poussière! (98)

The insertion of Malinké verse serves a purpose similar to that of the griot’s commentary. Once again, the reader is made aware of the oral quality and true author of the story. In this case, there is also an emphasis on the original language and poetry of the epic. Camara’s version suggests that appreciating and understanding the Sunjata epic without understanding the Malinké language is impossible. The reader who does not understand Malinké will be unable to access complete knowledge of the epic. Although the Malinké passages are accompanied by French translations, the reader has no way of knowing how accurate the translations are. Through the insertion of Malinké verse, Camara helps maintain a sense of secrecy in the written version.

Secrecy is important in the Niane version as well. In one of the griot’s interjections, he comments on the difference between orality and literacy as well as the importance of secrecy, claiming:

D’autres peuples se servent de l’écriture pour fixer le passé ; mais cette invention a tué la mémoire chez eux ; ils ne sentent plus le passé car l’écriture n’a pas la chaleur de la voix humaine. Chez eux tout le monde croit connaître alors que le savoir doit être un secret. (78)

The griot's position parallels that of Socrates as he points out the advantages of *not* writing things down. Although participating in a literary project, Kouyaté seems to regret allowing Niane to put his words on paper. Interestingly, Niane switches from “connaître” to “savoir” when referring to knowledge that should be secret according to the griot. Either one knows it or one doesn't and Kouyaté clearly wishes to limit access to this privileged information. This interjection by the griot is particularly revealing as it brings up the question of just how reliable a narrator he could be. The reader cannot place much confidence in a narrator who purposely obscures parts of his story in order to protect secret information.

The idea of secrecy, an integral part of the West African oral tradition, thus finds its way into both written versions of the epic. Niane speaks of this secrecy in the *Avant-propos* to his work when he discusses the griots' training. He explains that griots are sworn to secrecy and only reveal parts of their knowledge because, they say, “Toute science véritable doit être un secret” (7). In this culture one must earn access to knowledge over time and not everyone is deemed worthy. It seems that this practice posed difficulties for Niane, but at the same time he has great respect for it. He continues:

Mes yeux viennent à peine de s'ouvrir à ces mystères de l'Afrique éternelle et dans ma soif de savoir, j'ai dû plus d'une fois sacrifier ma petite prétention d'intellectuel en veston devant les silences des traditions quand mes questions par trop impertinentes voulaient lever un mystère. (7)

As the work progresses, Niane is less patient with the secrecy of the griots. When in the course of the narrative his informant states “le savoir doit être un secret”, Niane includes a footnote to explain,

Ceci explique la parcimonie avec laquelle ces détenteurs des traditions historiques dispensent leur savoir. Selon eux les Blancs ont rendu la science vulgaire : quand un Blanc sait quelque chose tout le monde le sait. Il faudrait que nous arrivions à faire changer cet état d'esprit si nous voulons un jour savoir tout ce que les griots ne veulent pas livrer. (78-79n)

Niane wants to change the griots' attitudes towards knowledge. He wants to be able to put everything that they know down on paper. This puts him at odds with his griot-informant and with traditional society in general. At the end of the story this conflict of interest between the griot and the author becomes all the more clear. The griot gives no details about Sunjata's death, stating simply that he was buried "non loin de Niani-Niani à Balandougou, la cité de barrage" (150). At this point Niane includes another footnote stating: "Ici Djeli Mamadou Kouyaté n'a pas voulu aller plus loin" (150n). Niane himself, however, does go further and elaborates several different theories that can be pieced together to explain Sunjata's death. In so doing, he disobeys the griot's final warning as the story comes to an end:

Malheureux, n'essaye point de percer le mystère que le Manding te cache ; ne va point déranger les esprits dans leur repos éternel ; ne va point dans les villes mortes interroger le passé, car les esprits ne pardonnent jamais : ne cherche point à connaître ce qui n'est point à connaître (152).

For Niane, discovering all he could about oral literature and tying it to modern chronological history was an important way to validate the oral tradition and gain respect for it in the eyes of the West. He wanted to portray the griots as accurate historians and reliable narrators. For Kouyaté, the griot, this kind of research was unacceptable and would defile the oral tradition. He was more concerned with protecting secrets than with diffusing knowledge and this makes him a

quite unreliable narrator. Miller sums the situation up thus, “The last words of the Niane/Kouyaté collaboration thus mark an impasse between writer and speaker, new and old, history and secrecy. (In spite of Mamadou Kouyaté’s warning, Niane led excavations which exposed the site of Sunjata’s capital, Niani.)” (97-98). This makes it clear that while the written versions of the Sunjata epic acknowledge the griots’ desire for secrecy, they end up exposing the secrets for all to access. In their efforts to validate the oral tradition they contradict an important part of it. Despite this fundamental breach of trust, however, Niane’s *Soundjata* and Camara’s *Le Maître de la parole* do acclaim traditional African cultures in several ways.

Both versions recount the uplifting story of how a boy who could not even walk until the age of seven rose to become the worthy and competent leader of a vast empire. Sunjata and his mother are driven into exile while he is still a young boy, but he uses his wanderings to make alliances and learn all he can. When he hears that his homeland has fallen under the control of foreigners and that his half-brother has fled, Sunjata returns in triumph. He is able to vanquish the evil sorcerer Soumaoro and establish a unified system to govern the empire, delegating responsibilities to his friends and allies. Sunjata’s success validates West African cultures, showing that organized systems of government existed long before the arrival of the Europeans. Moreover, the story of Sunjata makes it clear that Africa is steeped in history, quite the contrary of the colonial notion of a “dark continent” whose history began only with the arrival of the colonists.

An integral part of the epic which emerges in both written versions is an emphasis on the spoken word and the power of those who can speak well. Niane illustrates this through the importance of the griot who serves the king and represents the king’s power. When the old king is near death, he calls for his son Sunjata, still a child, and tells him:

Je me fais vieux, bientôt je ne serai plus parmi vous ; mais avant que la mort ne m'enlève, je vais te faire le cadeau que chaque roi fait à son successeur. Au Manding chaque prince a son griot : le père de Doua a été le griot de mon père ; Doua est mon griot ; le fils de Doua, Balla Fasséké que voici sera ton griot. Soyez dès ce jour des amis inséparables : par sa bouche tu apprendras l'histoire de tes ancêtres, tu apprendras l'art de gouverner le Manding selon les principes que nos ancêtres nous ont légués. (39-40)

By assigning the son of his griot to his son Sunjata, the old king has chosen his successor. The words of the griot will give Sunjata the power to govern. When Sunjata's half-brother usurps the power, it is significant that he first sends Balla Fasséké, Sunjata's griot, out of the area on a diplomatic mission. Upon Sunjata's return from exile, although he uses war to establish his kingdom, he relies on the spoken word more than violence. His success comes primarily from diplomacy and alliances: old bonds formed during his youthful wanderings and new bonds with people who had been under the tyranny of Soumaoro result in many powerful clans coming together to support him. Sunjata is able to convince vast numbers of people to take his side. The spoken word is an extremely powerful force throughout this work.

Camara's version of the epic also exalts the spoken word; even the title, *Le Maître de la parole*, suggests that controlling the spoken word confers great power. This version contains similar references to the importance of the king's griot and to Sunjata's reliance on diplomacy to establish his kingdom. A final chapter is dedicated to the ceremony following the conquests in which Sunjata's griot (in this version Balla Fassali) gives a speech:

-Peuples réunis, nous voici en paix après des années de souffrances, mais cette paix, nous la devons à un homme qui, de loin, a entendu nos gémissements. Cet

homme c'est Naré Maghan Diata [Sunjata]. Mes chers amis, je vous transmets à tous le salut de Soundiata. La paix est revenue, que Dieu nous la conserve pour longtemps !

-Amina ! répondit la foule avec enthousiasme. (227)

The griot's words solidify the peace Sunjata has established by convincing the people that their best interest is in remaining loyal to him. It is through words and not arms that Sunjata's kingdom is maintained.

By insisting on the griot as narrator, inserting elements from the oral tradition, and maintaining the theme of the power of the spoken word, Niane and Camara have produced effective written versions of the epic of Sunjata. Through the narration and content, these works promote an understanding of the richness of West African culture. The two versions illustrate well how Francophone authors in the early years were beginning to write in order to promote an appreciation of traditional African orality while putting forth a different version of African history. Another work, Birago Diop's *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba*, appears to have a similar motivation. However, unlike the previous works mentioned, it does not seek to reproduce a famous epic, but is simply a collection of traditional tales. The less rigid content of this collection allows the author more leeway to express his view of African orality and history through the narration and content of his choice.

Diop explains in the introduction to *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba* that his grandmother used to recount stories to him in the evenings when he was a child. Later, as an adult he encountered Amadou Koumba, his family's griot, who retold many of the same stories. These stories brought comfort to the author at difficult times in his life, and he attempted to write them down. But, the transition from orality to literacy was not easy. Diop explains his impediments:

C'est que surtout il me manque la voix, la verve et la mimique de mon vieux griot. Dans la trame solide de ses contes et de ses sentences, me servant de ses lices sans bavures, j'ai voulu, tisserand malhabile, avec une navette hésitante, confectionner quelques bandes pour coudre un pagne sur lequel grand-mère, si elle revenait, aurait retrouvé le coton qu'elle fila la première ; et où Amadou Koumba reconnaîtra, beaucoup moins vifs sans doute, les coloris des belles étoffes qu'il tissa pour moi naguère. (12)

The textile metaphor, comparing the retelling of a story to the weaving of cloth and the selecting of words to the selecting of colors, reinforces the idea that storytelling is an art and its proper execution requires a skillful artist.

Nevertheless Diop does not consider himself to be an artist on the same level as those who have come before him. He employs the same denial of authorship that we saw in the written versions of Sunjata and similarly seeks to minimize his role. He acknowledges, unlike Camara and Niane, that there are changes in the transition from oral to written, but presents such changes as only negative. His insistence on his own shortcomings in communicating what is in fact a very well-written collection of tales convinces the reader of just how skillful the traditional storytellers were. The stories, so engaging in this written collection, must have been exquisite in their oral form.

Diop does more to acknowledge orality in his work. As in Niane's and Camara's versions of the Sunjata epic, he maintains a griot as narrator and preserves the oral character of the work. The griot Amadou Koumba is a composite figure, not a real person. The existence of the griot-narrator is so crucial to the message of the book that Diop invented one to suit the purpose. He states in an interview with Mohamadou Kane:

Amadou Koumba N’Gom n’a été qu’un prête-nom, un pavillon commode pour couvrir presque toute la marchandise que j’ai essayé de présenter et qui m’est venue de plusieurs sources, depuis l’enfance jusqu’au “Retour au Bercaïl”, après mes longues randonnées, mes multiples rencontres et mes innombrables haltes. Et au bout de la route, Amadou Koumba s’appelait Youssoufa Diop, d’où cet équilibre du fonds africain et des acquisitions nouvelles dont mon frère présentait le type le plus réussi que j’aie connu. (Neveu)

So there was no Amadou Koumba. The stories come from different sources, and the author evokes his brother as having been an inspiration, but the collection is Diop’s. His use of a griot-narrator was a deliberate decision. Many of the stories are framed by the griot’s commentary, or by his conversations with the author. The stories arise spontaneously in the context of the situation and seem a very natural part of an oral society. The griot fulfills his traditional role, recounting stories that are not only entertaining, but also edifying. This time, however, his audience is not limited to those of his own language and culture. In the act of transcribing, translating, and adapting the oral stories while preserving the griot as narrator, Diop, like Camara and Niane, provides a much larger audience with access to his culture’s oral traditions.

Like the previously discussed authors, Diop had to find a way to adapt the oral to the written. The traditional folktales he wished to put on paper posed a number of challenges to the author. Tollerson explains that in the oral tales, characters are usually types, not individuals. Because these stock characters (e.g., the trickster and his foils) are fully known and comprehended by the African audience, they are not generally developed. In addition, there are no descriptions of settings or emotions, plots are linear, dialogue frequently carries the action, the didactic purpose of the tale is often secondary or hidden, miraculous elements may be

present, and traditional opening and closing formulas are typically used (Tollerson 83). These tales often have hidden messages: where children only understand an amusing story, those fully initiated into the society can discern much deeper meanings. The griot's role in telling the stories is absolutely crucial as he interprets the words, adapts the stories in function of the situation and audience, and uses repetition to build suspense and as a memory aid. Okpewho explains further that, "the storyteller simply has the bare outlines of the story and is expected to make the appropriate adjustments to the details in accordance to the interests of the audience [...]. The performer must accompany the words of the tale with the appropriate face and body movements to illustrate such things as fear, anxiety, delight, and the behaviors of various characters in the tale" (45). The words alone do not tell the whole story and cannot fully convey what Okpewho terms a "picturesque event".

Repetition is a key element of oral literature. Okpewho states that it is "no doubt one of the most fundamental characteristic features of oral literature" and that it serves both an "aesthetic and utilitarian value" (71). Repetition allows the audience to accompany the performer in going over a passage that has become familiar. It can mark a feeling of excitement or agitation or it can be used to impress the audience with the diversity of the performer's knowledge, where small variations in a repeated phrase lead to a sense of fullness and variety (Okpewho 72). This last instance can be illustrated by the Yoruba praise-chant, "Salute to the Onikoyi Lineage":

When you were surprised by the enemy in an open forest tract,
 You changed yourselves into forest trees.
 When you were surprised by the enemy in a savannah tract,
 You changed yourselves into savannah grass.

And when you were surprised by the enemy in a tract full of disused ant-hills,

You transformed yourselves into ant-hill mushrooms.

You are known as people who sometimes stay at home,

Sometimes live in the open forest,

Sometimes live in “transition woodland” tracts,

Sometimes live in the streets,

Sometimes live on a farm,

Sometimes live at Aawe,

Sometimes live at Aagba,

Sometimes at Kobai,

Sometimes at Ogbomoso,

Sometimes at Ile Ifon,

And sometimes at Kuta.

Men of war carrying sheaves of arrows. (cited in Okpewho 72-73)

Okpewho explains that the repetition in this poem serves to create “a picture of men constantly on the move, of daredevils ever anxious to test themselves in one theater of action after another”

(73). Repetition is an essential part of the chant and contributes to its success.

Elements such as repetition, gestures, voices and music to supplement the words make for a successful oral performance, but do not transcribe well onto the written page. The repetition becomes cumbersome, and the lack of details and emotions becomes alienating. The non-African reader certainly cannot pick up on hidden meanings and is likely to dismiss the stories as insignificant without ever understanding them. Diop, desiring to valorize his culture’s

oral tradition, necessarily made some significant changes to the tales while preserving as much as possible. His collection of stories contains much more in the way of explanations, details, and character development than the oral tales would typically have. Repetition and dialogue are reduced while plots become more complex. These changes are necessary to counterbalance the loss of the griot's physical presence and serve to accommodate the non-African audience's lack of background knowledge. Judging from the number of glowing homages that were published by African intellectuals following Diop's death in 1989, the reaction of the Francophone African readership to Diop's adaptations was extremely positive (Neveu).

As for the Western reaction, Tollerson contends that by adapting the stories to a written form, "Diop [has] moved the African folktale beyond the narrow confines of the specialist's interest into the vast domain open to students of literature and to the general reading public" (115). He was able to capture the griot's artistry in a way that a mere transcription/translation could not. Literary analysis of Africa's folktales became possible and, says Tollerson, "These analyses led to written articles which promoted understanding of the culture of Africa and proved that Africa had a literature capable of winning a place for itself among the literatures of the world" (115). While it is ironic that Diop used literacy to promote understanding and appreciation of his culture's orality, he nevertheless succeeded in valorizing the oral tradition and thus an African culture and way of life through this piece of written literature.

The premise of this collection of traditional stories seems simple: a traditional storyteller retells traditional stories which Diop adapts into a written French version, providing access to the Western world. Nevertheless, it would be superficial to stop there, as we know that the oral tales often contained hidden meanings. Therefore, as Miller reminds us, we need to read African

literature in conjunction with anthropology. A deeper understanding of *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba* requires more knowledge about griots in West African society.

Griots, as discussed in the introduction, are a group of people whose role in society is to serve as storytellers, singers, genealogists, trustees of the oral tradition, manipulators of the spoken word. But while griots may be respected in their societies, they are also feared and stigmatized. Anthropologist Patrick McNaughton describes the Mande social system as being divided into three main groups since the time of Sunjata in the thirteenth century. The three groups consist of farmers or “nobles” who make up the majority of the population, captives, and specialized professionals, also known as people of caste or *nyamakala* (1). These population groups still exist today despite the fact that the “nobles” are often poor subsistence farmers, the “captives” are not held against their will, and the *nyamakala* can aspire to any occupation. People still know what category they are born into and continue to practice endogamy. Those in the first category still often consider themselves to have a higher social rank than those in the other two.

Griots belong to the third population group, the specialized professionals, called *nyamakala*. This group includes blacksmiths, leatherworkers, pottery makers, and bards (griots) (McNaughton 5-7). There are a number of factors that make this group quite different from the majority population. McNaughton explains,

They are considered different and unusual, mysterious and even strange. They consider themselves and are considered by others to belong to separate races, *siw*, who live with the Mande and are indelibly incorporated into Mande life [...] Then there is the matter of special attributes. Nearly everyone believes that members of

these special clans possess a mysterious spiritual power that underpins occult practices and makes the people possessing it potentially dangerous. (3)

The *nyamakala* manipulate potentially dangerous forces, or *nyama*. *Nyama* is a special energy that is released when working with materials such as gold, iron, leather, wood, clay, and words. This energy requires skill and inherited ability to be controlled safely (McNaughton 15). The *nyamakala*'s special abilities in this area make them both respected and shunned.

In the case of the griots, the dangerous forces being manipulated are spoken words (Miller 78). Miller describes the griots' role: "While their main function, praising the powers that be, makes them indispensable to support the status quo and protect nobles from the contamination of having to use loud, imprudent language, the nobles' dependence on these professional spokesmen only increases their distrust of them" (81). There is certainly an undertone of discrimination built into the system, but at the same time, these groups are not simple objects of contempt, for they possess great power. Miller concludes, "Griots, manipulating the word instead of gold or iron, are objects of resentment, fear, and mistrust, but because of their ability to manipulate the most powerful force in the world – that of the word – they must also be treated with deference, placated, and bought off" (85). Clearly, a griot is much more than simply a good storyteller.

This more complex understanding of the griot's place in West African society brings new light to an interpretation of *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba*. Diop presents Amadou Koumba as "le Griot de ma famille" (11). This reference allows a glimpse of the social system wherein the griots serve the well-born. However, in the stories that follow, Amadou Koumba seems to be simply a friend and companion to the author. He recounts stories as they come up, not as part of any ritual. In fact, the griot goes against tradition in not confining his storytelling to the evening

hours. Diop admits, “Amadou Koumba m’a raconté, certains soirs – et parfois, de jour, je le confesse – les mêmes histoires qui bercèrent mon enfance” (11). Through this work, Diop minimizes the differences between himself and the griot.

Indeed, Diop actually becomes a griot through the writing of *Les Contes d’Amadou Koumba*. There are, it seems, two narrators and thus two griots in the work. Diop narrates the introduction to each story which he then retells with the griot as narrator. But, unlike the griots cited by Camara and Niane who were real people and whom the authors consulted extensively, we know that Amadou Koumba didn’t really exist. Diop is the true griot behind the work; it is his voice that recounts the traditional stories of his childhood. By taking on the role of griot, a stigmatized position in his society, Diop challenges the validity of that stigma. It would be unthinkable for a noble-born person like Diop to become a griot in real life, but writing allows him to take on this role and expose the absurdity of the stigma. Thus, the work valorizes the African oral tradition while including an implicit critique of social conventions.

And this brings us to another important aspect of oral literature: its role in criticizing society. As Okpewho states, “A great deal of critical spirit is embodied in African oral literature” (147). The criticism can be hidden in praise poetry or presented more openly. For example, in the concluding part of a long praise chant in honor of a Sotho leader’s victory over enemies we encounter the following criticism:

Black white-spotted ox, though you’ve come with gladness,
 Yet you have come with grief,
 You have come with cries of lamentation,
 You have come as the women hold their heads
 And continually tear their cheeks.

Keep it from entering my herds:

Even in calving, let it calve in the veld,

Let it calve at Qoaling and Korokoro.

To these cattle of our village it brings distress,

It has come with a dirge, a cause of sadness.

Thesele, the other one, where have you left him? (cited in Okpewho 147)

Okpewho explains that in a raid on neighboring villages, the leader was so intent on rounding up all the heads of cattle that he was unaware of the death of his brother and other young warriors in the fighting. The cattle are seen as tainted and the villagers want to keep them isolated (147-8). The last stanzas of this praise song, by lamenting the death of Thesele, implicitly critique the leader's ambition which blinded him to the danger his brother was in.

Critical songs are also used to encourage proper conduct and issue a warning when individuals or groups indulge in habits that are detrimental to society. This song from the Igbo of eastern Nigeria illustrates the point:

We know how to speak English

We know how to speak Igbo

Why are school boys of today so ignorant?

You test them in Igbo they fail

You test them in English they fail

The school fees we pay are wasted

“Bongo” trousers have ruined them

“Bongo” trousers have ruined them. (cited in Okpewho 149)

Okpewho explains, “Floppy, bell-bottomed “bongo” trousers were in vogue among young men in Nigeria in the 1960s and 1970s; an indulgence in this mode of fashion, says the song, has turned the heads of the youths away from the pursuit of education” (149). In this case, the critique allows an older generation to express its concerns to the younger one. In yet other instances songs were used to criticize injustice and brutality under white colonial rule (150). Whether criticizing an individual or a flaw in society, the oral tradition allows for the expression of grievances. Diop utilizes this tradition of criticism to implement a reframing of the griot’s place in society and a destigmatization of population groups in West Africa.

Another important theme running through all of the folktales in Diop’s collection is the importance of the spoken word. Whether it was Diop’s deliberate intention to emphasize this or whether it is simply an essential element occurring in most African folktales, the importance of the spoken word highlights the orality of the culture once again. (Of course, in a written narrative there are not really spoken words, but rather the transcription of spoken words in dialogue form.) Jacques Bourgeacq points out that many of the tales demonstrate the particular power of the word. He explains,

Une parole particulière, prononcée au moment opportun, par qui en est digne ou non, déclenche une série d'événements dont les conséquences (métamorphoses, transfert de plans existentiels) ne cessent de souligner la conception d'un monde aux multiples correspondances. (220)

In “Fari l’ânesse” a donkey disguised as a beautiful woman changes back into a donkey when the king’s griot sings a song the donkeys were overheard singing. In “Les Mamelles” a good-hearted hunchbacked woman is freed of her hump by repeating the words taught her by an old woman who turns out to be a genie, while an ill-tempered woman repeating the same words

gains a second hump and is driven to suicide. In “Petit-Mari” a little girl’s insistence on calling her brother “little husband” after the death of their father leads to the death of the three remaining family members. In “La Biche et les chasseurs” M’Bile-la-Biche outsmarts several hunters and is about to destroy her arch-nemesis, the hunter N’Diomane, when he remembers the pact humans have with dogs and calls to his hunting dogs, whom he was tricked into killing and preparing for his guests:

Ô! Worma, Wor-ma
 Chiens de mon père,
 Que j’ai trahis
 Ne me trahissez pas!
 Ô! Dig, Ô! Digg
 N’Dioumane désespère
 Secourez-le!... (145)

At these words, the dogs come to life from their bones and blood and rush to the rescue of their master. Amadou Koumba introduces this story by invoking the power of the mouth:

Esclave de la tête, la bouche commande au reste du monde, parle et crie en son nom, souvent à tort, parfois avec raison, sans demander leur avis ni au ventre, qui mangerait encore alors qu’elle se déclare rassasiée, ni aux jambes, qui ne voudraient plus marcher quand elle se dit capable d’aller plus loin. (131)

This comical personification of the mouth is important for understanding the stories in this collection. The mouth is powerful, even a tyrant, because of its capacity to speak. Words direct the outcomes of the stories, changing the destinies of the characters. Clearly, they are one of the most powerful forces in this universe.

In addition to this personification of the mouth, Bourgeacq notes that even the word itself is personified in the collection (220). In “Vérité et Mensonge,” Fène-le-Mensonge and Deug-la-Vérité go on a trip together. Because of proverbs like “Le bon Dieu aime la vérité”, they decide that Deug will do all the talking when they stop in villages along the way. But Deug’s way of always stating the raw truth offends their hosts and leaves the travelers without food or shelter night after night. When they finally decide to let Fène take over, he constructs a magnificent lie and gains half of the king’s riches. Fène and Deug conclude that people are not like God and do not love the truth.

This story is significant because it reveals the West African conception of the spoken word. Bourgeacq insists that “Vérité et Mensonge” should not be thought of simply as an allegory because in this culture the spoken word is seen as possessing its own life; it is born and dies like any living being (221). In an oral society, the spoken word is of utmost importance and one must know how to use it well. This includes, of course, knowing when to lie and when to speak the truth. Realizing this helps the reader better understand the stigma and mystery surrounding griots. As professional manipulators of spoken words, they know better than anyone how to manipulate others through the words they speak.

Another story in the collection that revolves around the spoken word is “Un Jugement”. In this story the protagonist Demba is in a very bad mood and takes out his wrath on his wife Koumba, who can do nothing right. After yelling at her and beating her, he finally says: “Retourne chez ta mère, je te répudie” (22). He realizes very quickly that this was a mistake and wants Koumba back, but when he goes to her parents’ house she reminds him that he repudiated her and therefore she will not go back with him. Demba insists that he did not repudiate her. It’s his word against hers with neither willing to give in, so the couple must travel from village to

village seeking someone who is wise enough to discover the truth and resolve the argument. At last they find a great marabout who hears their story but makes no decision that night. The next morning the marabout turns around suddenly and asks, “Où est l’homme qui a répudié sa femme?” “Me voici”(29) answers Demba and the question is resolved.³

Because of words spoken in anger and in haste, Demba loses his wife. He did not properly respect the power of the spoken word. As the marabout tells him, “Homme, ta langue a enfin devancé ton esprit et ta bouche a consenti à dire la vérité” (29). Demba’s tongue gets ahead of his mind both when he repudiates his wife and when he admits in public that he did so. This cautionary tale warns of the consequences of imprudent language. The tongue must be carefully guarded because the words one says do count!

In addition to the theme of the power of the spoken word, there is another more subtle theme running through Diop’s collection of stories: the importance of silence and secrecy. In several of the stories, characters’ secrets are exposed to their undoing. In “Fari l’ânesse” a secret metamorphosis of female donkeys into women in order to gain access to the king’s riches is eventually revealed and the donkeys become men’s slaves. In “Un jugement”, as we’ve seen, Demba’s secret that he truly did repudiate his wife is found out and he loses her. In other instances we see that secret information loses its power once revealed. In “Les mamelles” the secret formula that liberates one hunchbacked woman of her hump cannot be repeated with the same effect by another woman. In “Les Calebasses de Kouss” Leuk-le-Lièvre stumbles upon a secret and obtains a magical calabash that fills itself with jewels at his command. Bouki-l’Hyène attempts to recreate the circumstances described by Leuk, but the only thing that comes out of

³ This appears to be a shared fable or universal experience, with versions present in many cultures. Resolving a dispute by eliciting a quick response from the parties involved brings to mind the story of Solomon in the *Bible*, Voltaire’s *Zadig*, and a situation in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Le Chevalier au Lion*, to name a few.

his calabash is a bludgeon that beats him vigorously. Secrets, it seems, do not work once they have been compromised. Many of the short stories in this collection reveal not only the power of the spoken word, but also oppose it to the power of silence and secrets. Secrets, once revealed, betray those who use them, while words have the power to change circumstances through the exposure of secrets. As we have seen, traditional oral literature is full of secrets, hidden meanings, and restrictions. Diop made the stories more accessible to Western audiences, but doesn't seem to have revealed many secrets. In an interview with Ibrahima Baba Kaké, he said that he preferred to leave the interpretation of his stories up to others and that he himself did not claim to understand the deeper meanings behind many of the tales (Neveu). A shroud of secrecy remains over the work.

The emphasis on orality and the power of speech and silence in *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba* enables Diop to address history from an African perspective. The griot narrator expresses a point of view that predates that of the colonizers and is therefore not affected by their values or beliefs. The stories in the collection that we have discussed thus far point to a time long before colonization, before writing took precedence. They seem to emphasize the normalcy and simplicity of living freely on one's land. By ignoring the presence of the colonizers, Diop concentrates on tradition and culture, not history.

But the last story, "Sarzan," is different. This story deals directly with the colonial presence in Africa and is sharply critical of it. In the story Sergeant Thiémokho Keita returns to his village after fifteen years in the French army. His village is one of the few remaining where traditional religious and cultural practices are maintained despite the Islamization and later French colonization of the region. Keita mocks and criticizes all he sees. Suddenly, while speaking irreverently beneath the "arbre à palabres", he loses his mind and becomes completely

senseless. From this point on the people address him only as “Sarzan” (Sergeant) for they no longer consider him to be a Keita. The ancestors and genies of the village have avenged themselves for his offences.

This is the only story in the collection that is set in Diop’s time, and Diop himself is the narrator, not Amadou Koumba. This seems to be not a traditional tale, but rather an eyewitness account of the tragedy of losing one’s culture. At the time, the European colonists were encouraging Africans to abandon their traditional culture and language in order to assimilate and become French. The European historical accounts from this time period therefore considered it a good thing that most villages were giving up their traditional religious and cultural practices, but Diop certainly does not agree. In this story, losing one’s culture is equated with losing one’s mind. Considering that orality is a crucial part of traditional African cultures, “Sarzan” is a fitting way to end this collection of stories from the oral tradition. Diop’s interpretation of history emphasizes what Africa lost to colonization.

Bourgeac notes that “Sarzan”, along with the Introduction, forms a contemporary framework that surrounds the traditional folktales in the collection. He continues, “Or c'est précisément dans la mesure où la tradition peut continuer à s'intégrer au monde contemporain, qu'elle garde toute sa valeur et toute sa puissance” (223). This is exactly what Keita was not able to do. By failing to integrate the traditions of his ancestors into his contemporary world and by refusing to listen to “l’arbre qui frémit”, “le bois qui gémit”, “la voix du feu”, “l’eau qui coule”, Keita loses his identity (his name) and is condemned to join his voice to that of the things he once ignored as he sings nonsensically night and day (Bourgeac 223). Significantly, the family name *Keita* indicates a descendant of Sunjata Keita, emperor of Mali. The loss of such a noble and historically rich name is even more tragic than losing just any name. Diop makes it clear

that having traditions is an important part of being human. Renouncing one's culture and one's past leads only to loss, not development.

Diop's collection of short stories thus seeks to valorize the oral tradition much as Niane's and Camara's versions of the Sunjata epic do. The griot-narrator plays a critical role in this process as he lends authenticity to the texts. Themes closely connected to the oral tradition such as the power of the spoken word and the importance of secrecy run through all three works and enable us to see how they were influenced by orality.

Putting a griot's words on paper has proven to be a more complex process than one might think. Orality and writing are competing discourses that convey information in very different ways. A simple transcription of an oral performance cannot do it justice: changes must be made and literary techniques used to make up for the loss of oral and visual elements as well as the expanded audience's lack of background knowledge. Camara, Niane, and Diop have found ways to make this transition from oral to written possible. Although the griot-performer is not physically present on the written page, the authors make his impact felt through the narration and themes of their texts. Integrating references to orality throughout, they have transformed parts of the African oral tradition into literary works of art, leading to a better understanding of African cultures and bringing to light African perspectives on history.

3. SUBVERTING ORALITY: FINDING THE WOMAN'S VOICE

Male authors using a griot's voice to narrate their works clearly value and seek to promote the African oral tradition through their writing. Female authors, however, often express a more nuanced attitude towards this oral tradition, which can be demeaning for women. *Une Si Longue Lettre* by Mariama Bâ and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* by Fatou Diome are two works recounted by women that illustrate the complex interplay of literacy and orality from a woman's perspective. In the view of these authors, traditional orality has many shortcomings and should not be unconditionally accepted. They emphasize the opportunities that literacy provides for women. Nevertheless, they do incorporate orality and the cultural richness it represents into their works, subverting it to suit their purposes.

It is hard to imagine a world without women's voices, and yet these voices have made themselves heard only recently in Francophone literature. Women have long been marginalized in many societies, and West Africa is certainly no exception. Discouraged by male dominated society from expressing their voices in the public realm, women's perspectives were often not taken into consideration. Irène Assiba D'Almeida confirms, "If women have made significant social advances by challenge and accommodation, by opposition, resistance, and subversion, their enforced silence – in particular the denial or limitation of their literate expression – remains nonetheless a common and painful reality" (1). The first work of West African Francophone literature truly to project the woman's voice is Mariama Bâ's *Une Si Longue Lettre*, published in

1979.⁴ Miller notes the significance of this novel, describing it as the first “explicit, self-conscious meditation on gender difference written by a woman in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa” (250). For the first time a woman’s voice offered its perspective on gender issues and, in so doing, promoted writing as a means of healing while finding a way to subvert traditional orality.

Une Si Longue Lettre is framed as a letter from one woman to another. In it, Ramatoulaye writes to her friend Aïssatou after the death of her husband, discussing the issues and events near to her heart such as marriage, polygamy, divorce, friendship, education, children, family, traditions, and politics. Every anecdote that she relates is informed by her perspective as a woman. Throughout the novel Bâ promotes the advancement of women and the importance of education. Literacy is key in allowing the women in the novel to progress and come into their own. Significantly, the novel focuses on educated women who read and write.

Since it was rare to send Senegalese girls to school in the 1940’s and 50’s, the two female protagonists of the novel are among the elite in this regard. As well-educated women in the French colonial system they each turn to writing in their moments of distress. Ramatoulaye writes in her seclusion following the death of her husband and finds healing. Writing the letter to Aïssatou allows Rama to express herself and proves to be cathartic. The letter begins: “Aïssatou, J’ai reçu ton mot. En guise de réponse, j’ouvre ce cahier, point d’appui dans mon désarroi: notre longue pratique m’a enseigné que la confidence noie la douleur” (7). Through writing, Rama is able to reflect upon and process the events in her life that are causing her so much anguish. She relives her marriage, her subsequent abandonment by her husband, and his unexpected death.

⁴ Miller notes that Aminata Sow Fall, another Senegalese woman, published the first novel by a Francophone African woman in 1975: *Le Revenant*. While gender issues are at stake in this work, it is not in the “programmatic and self-consciously political way that one finds in *Une Si Longue Lettre*” (Miller 250).

The letter, which functions like a journal that she updates throughout her period of seclusion in mourning and up to Aïssatou's arrival, allows her to express her true feelings, think about what she wants from the future, and make wise choices to ensure that future for herself and her children. By the end of the letter, Rama is in a superior position, both financially and emotionally. She concludes, "Le mot bonheur recouvre bien quelque chose, n'est-ce pas? J'irai à sa recherche. Tant pis pour moi, si j'ai encore à t'écrire une si longue lettre..." The old wounds are healed and Rama is full of hope for the future, thanks to the power of writing. As Mildred Mortimer points out, despite Rama's seclusion in mourning, literacy allows her to take an inner journey to self-understanding (70). While Rama's situation may not have changed concretely (she is still the widowed mother of twelve children), she now feels empowered to take control of her life.

In much the same way, Aïssatou turns to education after divorcing her husband, who has been encouraged by his family to take a second wife. Rama writes to her:

Les livres te sauvèrent. Devenus ton refuge, ils te soutinrent. Puissance des livres ; invention merveilleuse de l'astucieuse intelligence humaine [...] Les livres soudent des générations au même labeur continu qui fait progresser. Ils te permirent de te hisser. Ce que la société te refusait, ils te l'accordèrent: des examens passés avec succès te menèrent toi aussi en France. L'école d'Interprétariat, d'où tu sortis, permit ta nomination à l'Ambassade du Sénégal aux États-Unis. (51)

Because of her ability to read books, her education, Aïssatou is able to do something few Senegalese women could at that time: she earns the opportunity to study in France and later work in the United States. But even more importantly, she is able to control her own destiny, refuse a

polygamous marriage, raise her children as she sees fit, and live on her own terms. Although she must leave her homeland behind, her education gives her the courage and the means to break from tradition and be independent.

In contrast to Rama's inner journey of self-discovery, Aïssatou sets off on an outward journey and discovers the world. It is difficult to compare their journeys since Aïssatou's voice is not transmitted directly to us: Rama narrates her story in the letter. Nevertheless, in both cases the journeys are made possible through literacy and in both cases, they lead to an escape from difficult circumstances and, ultimately, healing. Bâ expresses her assurance that literacy redeems, uplifts, and brings generations together.

While Bâ glorifies literacy in *Une Si Longue Lettre*, she takes a somewhat conflicted view of orality. The work portrays literacy as offering opportunities to women and allowing them to escape from a repressive society, while orality and the social traditions in which it is rooted rather seem to hold them back. At the same time, orality is not completely rejected. As Mortimer points out, "Ramatoulaye creates an identity that blends traditional and modern elements. Rather than break with her society, she attempts to work from within" (75-76). In a passage in which Rama laments the difficulties of raising children, she remembers her grandmother:

Mes tourments s'estompent à l'évocation de ma grand'mère qui trouvait, dans la sagesse populaire, un dicton approprié à chaque événement. Elle aimait à répéter :
« la mère de famille n'a pas du temps pour voyager. Mais elle a du temps pour mourir. » (110)

The passage continues with Rama remembering the hard work her grandmother embodied and the wisdom with which she raised her children and grandchildren. Rama concludes, "Brave

grand'mère, je puisais dans ton enseignement et ton exemple, le courage qui galvanise aux moments des choix difficiles" (111). This passage shows that orality and tradition are still important to Rama. She respects her grandmother and finds comfort in repeating the morsels of traditional wisdom that the old woman used to recite. However, it is important to note that Rama does not blindly follow this traditional wisdom. When it comes to raising her daughters, she often goes against tradition.⁵ And despite the acknowledgement of the importance of orality, one must not forget that the entire book *Une Si Longue Lettre* is, in fact, a letter. It is Rama's written expression of her thoughts to her friend Aïssatou. The book ends with the two friends expecting to meet up the following day, but they never speak in the novel. Literacy takes precedence over orality in this work composed of a single letter.

It seems that a woman's experience with traditional orality is considerably less valorizing than a man's. In Mande society the traditional role of woman is that of wife, mother, and sister. Manthia Diawara explains that this role is absolutely crucial to society, as illustrated in the epic of *Sunjata*. In the epic, king Maghan Kon Fata takes a second wife, Sogolon, only in order to have a son who will become king. The epic emphasizes this by dwelling on Sogolon's ugliness in contrast to the beauty of the king's first wife. Sogolon becomes a dutiful mother who suffers for her child, Sunjata, and is entirely responsible for raising him. Sunjata's sister also plays a key role in his success by seducing his enemy and discovering the secret weapon that renders him vulnerable (Diawara 158). Diawara states:

In *The Epic of Soundiata*, the anchoring and the consolidation of the Mande empire depends on the continued use of woman as wife, mother, and sister.

⁵ For example, when her teenage daughter becomes pregnant out of wedlock, Rama insists that she continue her schooling, rather than drop out, and allows her to continue to see the man she loves rather than quickly marrying her off to someone else.

Women are prevented from existing outside of these restrictions in order to give birth to Soundiata, nourish him, and protect his identity as future king. (157)

Woman's supporting role in society is reinforced by the griot Kouyaté's narration of *Sunjata*. He insists, "Plus une femme aime son mari, plus elle le respecte, plus elle souffre pour son enfant, plus celui-ci sera valeureux un jour. Chacun est le fils de sa mère : l'enfant ne vaut que ce que vaut sa mère" (Niane 48). This way of thinking limits women and prevents them from taking an active role in society. It silences them because they must act only on behalf of their child, husband, or brother, and not on behalf of themselves.

In his anthropological study, *Gens de la parole*, Sory Camara helps further explain why women might have an ambivalent attitude towards orality. In traditional Mande society, women are considered incapable of keeping a secret and for this reason are excluded, along with children, from full initiation into the society. The oral tradition contributes to this marginalization of women and shapes their role in society (55-56). Camara continues:

Les légendes abondent en exemples où un homme est vaincu grâce à l'indiscrétion de sa femme. Elles justifient d'une certaine manière cette méfiance masculine, et contribuent à l'élaboration d'une certaine image de la femme, qui n'est pas sans influencer à son tour la psychologie féminine. [...] Mais il faut prendre garde de ne pas considérer le sexe faible comme frappé d'une sorte de tare ou de perversion : c'est le rôle attribué à la femme, sa situation même qui conditionnent les attitudes d'indiscrétion qu'on lui prête : si sa position formelle, son statut ne lui offrent aucune possibilité de participation directe aux décisions concernant la vie sociale, publique et politique, si elle est irrémédiablement condamnée à vivre dans l'ombre des hommes liés entre eux par le secret, il est

normal, et fortement probable, que la femme cherchera à œuvrer dans l'ombre, à éventer ce secret pour avoir indirectement quelque influence sur ceux qui mènent cette société. (56)

According to Camara, women often practice indiscretion and reveal secrets because it is the only form of power that they have. In fact, speech, something which is frowned upon in a society full of secrets, is considered a female's domain.

Camara explains in a later work, *Paroles très anciennes*, that griots, the masters of speech, constitute a connecting link between the sexes. In fact, the male griot is “neutre par rapport aux identités sexuelles considérées sur le plan social et culturel” and griots can therefore “participer de la femme tout en demeurant des hommes” (182). This quality of gender-neutrality enables the griots to speak on behalf of the well-born men in society. In Laye Camara's *Le Maître de la parole* which we already briefly examined in Chapter 2, the narrator provides this insight: “La parole était un art femelle exclusivement réservé aux griots et aux femmes, le roi qui pratiquait un art mâle, l'art de gouverner un peuple, ne pouvait s'en emparer et ne devait hurler! – et le griot cria les décisions royales qu'il entendit et les commenta en les agrémentant” (56-57). This shows that in traditional society, male griots control speech which is considered undignified, a “female art”. Despite speech being considered female, however, women themselves are silenced in the male-dominated society. Women are at a disadvantage in the world of orality, and also enter the literary scene much later than men, putting them at a disadvantage in the world of literacy as well. Miller sums the situation up thus: “Where silence is valorized (in Mande oral culture), speech is ‘female’ but controlled by men; where speech is valorized (in literacy), women are ‘silent’ (they don't write). Women are in fact silenced on both sides” (267).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that women do have a voice in traditional society. Marame Gueye points out that wedding songs constitute a form of orality that provides women with a voice and allows them to criticize a culture that tends to alienate them (66). She continues, “Although most *woyyi céet* [marriage songs] seem to reinforce the subordination of women, their sarcastic tone makes them very political and imbued with denunciation and protest” (67). These songs sung by women to a new bride advise and console her at an important stage of life. Other songs that are traditionally the domain of women in West African societies include songs at various women’s ceremonies, praise songs for women, and epics featuring women (Sidikou 22-23). We will discuss these songs in more detail later in the chapter, but we should note that all of these songs sung by women are intended for women: men are not typically part of the audience. Therefore these songs have a limited impact on society as a whole. As Aïssata Sidikou points out:

These complex rituals by and for women are created to alleviate the weight of their trials and hardships, but even this ritual escape cannot free them from the intricacies of society. Control and power cannot fall evenly on women and men because the complex gender stratification in many African societies does not allow such a simple solution. (79)

Women’s speech is not considered on an equal footing with men’s and therefore women struggle to make their voices heard in a meaningful way.

This additional knowledge about the relationship women have with speech in Mande society helps explain Bâ’s ambivalence towards orality in *Une Si Longue Lettre*. While Bâ’s novel takes place in Senegal, a country that is culturally dominated by the Wolof, it is comparable to the neighboring Mande. The history, social structure, and traditional cultural

practices of these groups are closely related (Miller 252). In either culture, a woman who speaks out about conditions in society may be received with scorn, but a woman who writes about the same topic garners a certain amount of respect from the male-dominated society due to the prestige this new medium enjoys in West Africa. Bâ's emphasis on literacy as a way for women to prosper and find healing shows how important it is in allowing women to find a legitimate voice. In recent years, more and more Francophone African women are gaining access to an education and are finding ways of projecting their voices through literacy.

The growing strength of the Francophone African woman's voice in modern times can be observed in the novel *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* by Fatou Diome, published in 2003. In this semi-autobiographical novel a young Senegalese woman, Salie, recounts her story in the first person. She lives in France, studying and working as a maid, but her heart seems to be back in Senegal, in the small fishing village of Niodior, where she is from and where her family remains. She gives very few details about her life in France, but writes extensively about people in Niodior, their daily lives, their hopes and dreams, and what happens to them when they leave the village. Stories of Salie's own childhood in Niodior are intertwined with anecdotes of others who cross her path. One of her biggest concerns in the book is her brother, Madické, who dreams of becoming a professional soccer player in Europe. Like almost everyone in Niodior, he believes that Salie lives a rich and privileged life in France and could easily help him if only she were willing to do so. Salie tries to explain the harsh realities of an African immigrant's life abroad, but it is a constant struggle to make herself heard above the cacophony of voices with opposing claims.

In some ways, the narration of the novel has a journalistic feel, much like *Une si longue lettre*. Salie records telephone conversations with her brother, expresses emotions in the present

tense, then recounts stories in the past. The narration is not chronological and Salie often goes off on tangents to express an opinion or tell a story. In the first chapter alone, she describes her emotions while watching a soccer match in her apartment in France, shares an anecdote about her grandmother collecting stars in a bucket of water, talks vaguely about her journey of immigration from Senegal to France, reveals why she cares about this European Cup game between Italy and the Netherlands: her brother back in Senegal is a big fan of Maldini and since he cannot always watch the games, she must watch them for him. She then imagines him watching the game in front of an old television and the range of emotions he goes through, talks about the children mesmerized by the half-time commercials for Coca-Cola and Miko, returns to Madické watching the game, which goes into overtime, and ends with a thunderstorm that knocks out the old television for good. The narration is informal and unstructured, giving the reader direct access to Salie's thoughts and feelings. It has the same intimacy as *Une Si Longue Lettre*, in which Rama writes to her close friend.

Le Ventre de l'Atlantique is full of references to orality, but they are not always positive. Madické is tired of the proverbs the older generation is quick to offer in every situation. Although they are a part of traditional African wisdom, Madické doesn't appreciate being limited by them. Salie narrates his thoughts of annoyance thus: "Il connaît cette philosophie de dinosaure, ce verbiage exotique, mille fois falsifié, que les Occidentaux nous collent à la peau pour mieux nous mettre à part" (23). This quite harsh dismissal of the value of proverbs shows that the younger generation of Africans does not necessarily wish to be defined by traditional orality.

Another negative example of traditional orality is a sort of mantra, often repeated by older people in the novel: "Chaque miette de vie doit servir à conquérir la dignité!" This

motivational saying puts so much pressure on the young people that they push themselves to extremes to make their families proud. It clearly becomes negative when it leads to the suicide of a young man, Moussa, deported from Europe after failing to make it as a professional soccer player and overstaying his visa. He cannot bear his family's disappointment in him so he drowns himself in the sea that separates him from that fabled place. Another young man who immigrates to France in the hopes of becoming rich, known only as the "homme de Barbès", systematically lies about his life in France, living in misery there so that he can impress his family and friends back home on the island with his generosity. Through these characters, Diome seems to warn about the overuse of traditional maxims, both as a way for outsiders to over-simplify African cultures and as a way that African elders impose their expectations on the youth.

Nevertheless, Diome uses proverbs quite abundantly in the work, although their inclusion is not always a valorization of traditional orality. The proverbs pertaining to women are often quite cruel and clearly demonstrate the challenges that women face in traditional Senegalese society. For example, villagers discuss Salie's divorce, saying: "L'âne n'abandonne jamais le bon foin... si un homme quitte sa femme, c'est qu'elle n'a pas su être une bonne épouse" (60). The woman seems to always be at fault in these situations. Villagers also comment on the fact that Salie has no children: "L'agriculteur attend des récoltes de ses semailles", and "L'honneur d'une femme vient de son lait" (60). Once again she is summarily judged and categorized by people who know nothing about her situation, but have a proverb ready anyway. Other proverbs speak of the importance of having a male heir: "Nourrir des filles, c'est engraisser des vaches dont on n'aura jamais le lait", and "Berger sans taureau finira sans troupeau" (145). Daughters are not valued as highly as sons, and women are invariably blamed when they give birth only to

girls. The sexism of the society is revealed through its proverbs and is therefore hard to combat, since it is so tightly woven into the identity of the people.

In addition to perpetuating sexist attitudes, orality helps spread lies about the immigrant's life abroad. Through word of mouth, the "homme de Barbès" spreads his stories about the supposed paradise he found in France. He tells the young people gathered around: "Tout ce dont vous rêvez est possible. Il faut vraiment être un imbécile pour rentrer pauvre de là-bas" (87). Salie notes that what he says contradicts not only her own experience, but also several African novels on the subject. However, since the villagers do not read, they believe him. She laments, "Il avait été *un nègre à Paris* et s'était mis, dès son retour, à entretenir *les mirages* qui l'auréolaient de prestige. Comptant sur l'oralité pour battre tous ceux qui avait écrit sur cette ville, il était devenu le meilleur ambassadeur de France" (88). Here, Diome references *Un Nègre à Paris* by Bernard Dadié and *Mirages de Paris* by Ousmane Diop Socé, both of which recount the disillusionment that a young African immigrant experiences in France. Dominic Thomas points out that while the "homme de Barbès" appears to be an emblem of opportunity and power, in reality he is simply an instrument of continued oppression (250). He encourages the youth to dream of becoming rich in Europe, rather than aspiring to build up their own country. Because of the "homme de Barbès" presence, his version is more believable than that of the novels. In this case presence is abused and orality serves to keep the people in ignorance.

It is evident that traditional African orality has a negative side in this novel. Diome does not, however, dismiss it altogether. There are instances in the novel where orality is portrayed in a positive and affirming light. Salie's stepfather often humiliates her because of her illegitimate birth, but one day she speaks up for herself by reciting a story her grandmother taught her in which her family name is glorified. Using this story from the oral tradition helps protect her

from the bullying of others. Salie concludes, “Ma grand-mère m’avait appris que si les mots sont capables de déclarer une guerre, ils sont aussi assez puissants pour la gagner” (79). This was her first inkling that she could harness the power of words to her advantage.

Salie goes on to become a writer, choosing to use written words rather than spoken ones to tell her stories. Perhaps because of her Western education and the often limited role of women in oral literature, she favors writing. Nevertheless, her writing is influenced by her people’s orality and she uses a great many proverbs and proverb-like metaphors throughout the novel. A few examples follow:

Les histoires de famille, même très anciennes, flottent toujours dans les bassines
des femmes, qui les mijotent ensuite à leur manière. (55)

Le secret est un lait sur le feu, il finit par se répandre si on n’y prend pas garde.
(58)

Ceux qui ont un bon guide ne se perdent pas dans la jungle. (71)

Un cheval n’entend pas le bruit de son galop. (81-2)

Je n’ai jamais vu un lion dédaigner une gazelle. (148)

Qui tire la langue dans le désert ne s’arrête pas à deux pas de l’oasis ! (154-5)

Un baobab ne se met pas à genoux. (252)

These proverbs are less controversial than the ones concerning gender roles and they simply serve to explain and embellish the story. Their integration throughout the novel shows that Diome is influenced by orality and acknowledges its place in her culture.

Even the title, *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique*, appears tied to orality. Parfait Diandue explains that for the Serer of Senegal, the belly has particular connotations:

En effet, le ventre, par opposition axiologique à la tête, est le siège de la douleur, du secret, et de la parole. Il ne s'agit pas de la seule douleur physique mais surtout de la douleur morale. Quant à la tête, elle est le siège de la pensée et du savoir. En général, chez ces peuples des sentiments comme la colère, la joie, la méchanceté, la jalousie, etc. se rattachent au ventre ; tandis qu'une réalité comme l'intelligence est liée à la tête. (32-33)

In fact this idea of the belly being linked to emotions appears to be quite universal in West Africa. Cameroonian film-maker, Jean-Marie Teno, refers to “les gens du ventre” in his documentary *Afrique, je te plumerai* and postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe discusses “la politique du ventre” in his works. In both cases, the qualification “du ventre” indicates “ruled by emotions”.

By giving the ocean a belly, Diome gives it emotions, pain, secrets, and a voice. The Atlantic almost seems to become a griot, holding on to secrets no one else knows about, like the babies drowned in it and the suffering of all those who cross and recross it, all the while telling its own version of the Niodior story. The isolated island is defined by its place in the ocean, and its people are explained by the ocean. The Atlantic becomes a symbol for both the secrets and the stories of orality.

Orality therefore contributes significantly to the novel's presentation; nevertheless, literacy takes precedence. In a very similar way to its role in *Une Si Longue Lettre*, literacy allows for the protagonist's escape from a sexist world. Thomas writes:

For [Diome], much in the same way as for other African women writers of an earlier generation (such as Mariama Bâ), writing provides the space for her to explore the ambiguity of her displacement and the opportunity to reflect on the

circumstances of migration as they pertain to Senegal in general and her native island of Niodior more specifically. (245)

Writing is a way for women to examine their circumstances and work through their challenges, whatever they may be. But, like Aïssatou, Salie must leave her homeland and live in exile.

As an illegitimate child, Salie struggled with life on the isolated and rigidly traditional island of Niodior. She was independent and willful from the start and her destiny seemed to be at odds with the only one afforded to women on the island: that of subservient wife and dutiful mother. As a young child, Salie started going to school of her own accord, despite the fact that her grandmother had not enrolled her. She remembers her teacher, M. Ndétare, with gratitude: “Je lui dois l’école. Je lui dois l’instruction. Bref, je lui dois mon *Aventure ambiguë*. Parce que je ne cessais de le harceler, il m’a tout donné: la lettre, le chiffre, la clé du monde” (66). Here, Diome references *L’Aventure ambiguë* by Cheick Hamidou Kane, which traces the education of a young boy in a noble family in West Africa from a traditional Koranic school to a French colonial school to university studies in France. Like Salie, he struggles with the isolation that his education brings as he seeks to reconcile the opposing views to which he is exposed.

Salie recognizes that her education allowed her a different life than that of the other girls in Niodior. Instead of joining them in the unending chores that also served as a social gathering, she began to write in a notebook she always carried with her. The writing isolated her from her peers, then led her away as she pursued her education in the regional capital and later in France. When she returns on a visit she notes how different she is from the village women her age: “Mon stylo continuait à tracer ce chemin que j’avais emprunté pour les quitter. Chaque cahier rempli, chaque livre lu, chaque dictionnaire consulté est une brique supplémentaire sur le mur⁶ qui se

⁶ Perhaps this line is a reference to Pink Floyd’s *Another Brick in the Wall* which protests against rigid schooling.

dresse entre elles et moi” (171). Salie struggles because literacy separates her from her home village, but at the same time it enables her to be at home anywhere. She concludes, “Je cherche mon territoire sur une page blanche ; un carnet, ça tient dans un sac de voyage. Alors, partout où je pose mes valises, je suis chez moi” (255). Literacy has given her the home that orality never did. Thomas notes, “Writing offers Salie a way to process the legacy of migration in which *l’exil* represents a ‘suicide géographique’” (259). Salie comes to terms with her status of immigrant and embraces what makes her different from her compatriots through writing. Unhappy in France and ill at ease during her visit home to Senegal, Salie can only be herself, it seems, on the written page. Like Rama and Aïssatou, Salie finds a sense of direction through literacy and through it is able to reach her full potential.

Notable women writers from West Africa like Bâ and Diome emphasize the importance of literacy for women instead of merely glorifying orality, in contrast with Diop, Camara, and Niane. The women do not embrace the role of female griot, also known as a *griotte* or *jeli muso*. Despite the fact that the *griotte* represents a traditional avenue for the expression of the woman’s voice, Bâ and Diome do not choose to exploit it. While *griottes* are mentioned in both *Une Si Longue Lettre* and *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique*, in both cases they are portrayed in a negative light. In the former, Rama’s neighbor Farmata the *griotte* is depicted as an unwanted meddler in Rama’s personal life. Rama dismisses her abilities saying, “Elle était toujours à la recherche du futur avec ses cauris et les moindres concordances de ses prédictions avec la réalité l’exaltaient” (96). Farmata tries to push Rama into accepting Daouda Dieng’s marriage proposal, misinterpreting her agitation for love, but Rama sends a letter via Farmata rejecting the proposal. It is the *griotte*’s traditional role to intervene in personal matters, speaking on behalf of the noble

who commissions her, but Rama was not comfortable with this practice and sends her message in a letter rather than by word of mouth, thus favoring absence over presence. Rama notes:

Pour la première fois, j'avais recours à Farmata et j'en étais gênée. Elle ? Elle jubilait, ayant rêvé à ce rôle depuis notre jeunesse. Mais j'agissais toujours seule ; elle n'était jamais intervenante dans mes problèmes, seulement informée, comme une 'vulgaire connaissance', se plaignait-elle. Elle jubilait, ignorante du cruel message dont elle était chargée. (99)

On another occasion Farmata leads Rama to the discovery that her daughter Aïssatou is pregnant. While the *griotte* claims that the cowry shells told her, Rama counters, "La rumeur publique l'avait sans doute aiguillonnée ou son sens développé de l'observation l'avait simplement servie" (117). Rama discounts Farmata's special powers and questions her motivations. When the *griotte* is disappointed that Rama forgives rather than punishes her daughter, Rama attributes this to her disappointment at not being able to preside over and profit from a grand wedding ceremony: "[Farmata] rêvait de festivités et voilà que cette fille est allée se donner à un jeune étudiant désargenté, qui ne lui sera jamais reconnaissant. Elle me reprochait mon calme" (122). When Farmata insults the father of Aïssatou's baby he doesn't respond and Rama concludes, "Peut-être la connaissait-il de nom et de caractère, pour lui opposer un silence si poli" (124). Bâ's portrayal of the *griotte* is certainly not flattering.

Diome is even less sympathetic in her brief mention of a *griotte*. In this case a divorced woman has caught the attention of a wealthy older man and a *griotte* shows up just to profit from the situation; "La griotte du quartier, agent secret des froufrous, qui tirait sa pitance de la flatterie, rapportait les rumeurs sans en avoir l'air" (143). The *griotte* exaggerates the felicity of the potential union between the two, liberally distributing praise to both parties. But her

presence is only an annoyance: “Sans remettre son flair en question, on la muselait d’un petit billet pour s’en débarrasser” (144). In both of these novels, griottes are portrayed as busybodies, unwanted meddlers, interfering nuisances, and manipulative gossipers seeking to profit from those they “help”. This seems quite different from the respected and feared male griots and not the image to which most novelists would want to aspire.

Further study of *griottes* is essential for understanding why Bâ and Diome portray them in such a negative light. Unfortunately, compared to the relative wealth of information about male griots, very little has been written about their female counterparts. As Thomas Hale confirms: “The relative absence of scholarship on *griottes* in particular and women performers in general seems to be symptomatic in a larger sense of the basic gender bias that has marked much social science research by scholars trained in the West, African and non-African” (73). Hale explains this paucity of information in part by noting that the position of griots is already so far down on the social ladder that the women, a rung below the men, may disappear from the view of male nobles and thus from that of most scholars as well (74). Recent publications are beginning to rectify the situation and will serve as my sources for understanding the role of female performers in traditional society.

As is frequently observed in West Africa, there is a division of function between male and female griots. The *griottes* “sing songs of praise and advice, serve as intermediaries in delicate interpersonal negotiations, and articulate the values of society at major social events” (Hale 71). Only men may recount sacred epics such as *Sunjata*, but women often participate in the performance by singing the songs in the epic (Hale 80). In fact, women’s singing voices are generally preferred to men’s, especially in praise songs, and they are the “animatrices” at traditional ceremonies such as weddings and baby-naming ceremonies (Hale 75). With rare

exceptions, women do not play instruments and are therefore frequently accompanied by male instrumentalists (Hale 84). Unfortunately, male griots treat women as second-class participants and invariably take a larger share of the payment for their performances (Hale 83). Perhaps it is considered more prestigious and more difficult to play a musical instrument and recite the sacred words and history of the epics than to simply sing. *Griottes* are overlooked and underestimated everywhere they turn. Hale explains, “Today, as scholars, both African and non-African, attempt to piece together the complex cultural history of West Africa, the world of war, diplomacy, and governance, traditionally viewed by men as their domain, continues to attract more attention than songs sung by women at weddings and naming ceremonies” (77). Women griots, it seems, have been marginalized both in their own culture and by outsiders who are studying it.

The fact that it is not culturally acceptable for women to recite sacred epics like *Sunjata* is particularly significant. In the chapter on the griot’s voice we noted that there were elements of the epic that the griot Kouyaté wanted to keep secret and did not disclose to Niane during the retelling. We also learned earlier in this chapter that women are considered to be untrustworthy and incapable of keeping a secret. Therefore it reasonably follows that *griottes* would not be deemed worthy of reciting epics containing “secret” material. The most prestigious genre in the griots’ repertoire is thus reserved for men only.

Sidikou counters that, in fact, women do recount epics, but theirs have simply not received the kind of attention as those of the men. She explains that some genres of women’s songs could be classified as epics. For example, the *saabi* of the Songhoy-Zarma people of Niger are long narrative poems composed by and for women celebrating and recognizing a woman’s proper behavior and attitude towards everyone in society (133). They are traditionally viewed as epics for women (142). In addition, *The Epic of Sara*, a narrative recounting the

dilemma of a young woman trying to get out of an unwanted marriage, was recorded in 1968 by Charles Bird as recounted by griotte Sira Mori Jabaté (144). Women's epics do exist and they have important messages to convey. Perhaps the problem of recognition lies in the current definition of the African epic. Sidikou contends that so little material has been collected and published from women's sources that existing definitions of epic are not accurate (145). Women's perspectives have not been taken into account even in defining what constitutes an epic in the African context. Regardless, we know that women do recite long poetic narratives which Sidikou terms the *subversive epic* (166). She concludes:

Thematically and stylistically, *The Epic of Sara* and the *saabi* under discussion offer a mirror image of courageous women in West African societies who can face and deal with crucial problems that hinder their progress. Whether in epics or in real-life situations, female heroism is celebrated in connection with their women's concerns about questions of identity, joy and fulfillment. (165-66)

These epics can be considered subversive not only because they are told by women about women, but also because they provide examples of women who were able to defy society's expectations of them while not cutting themselves off from that society. For example, in *The Epic of Sara*, Sara feigns illness to avoid an arranged marriage and in the *saabi* "The Wicked Man" an unnamed woman contrives to leave her husband when she learns of his plan to use her to plant his farm and then divorce her. These women use their intelligence to protect themselves. Sidikou explains, "The woman as a trickster character shows how women get around many problems, such as forced marriages, the obligation to show unquestionable parental respect, and traditions and customs that in some cases make them victims" (161). The women are praised for not disobeying authority figures or breaking their word, and yet they are able to get what they

want through trickery. It seems that, with the skills and intelligence of the trickster, women are able to “subvert the existing ethnic, class and gender paradigms that thwart their progress and welfare” (Sidikou 165). These epics provide important examples of women who subvert tradition while remaining respectable in the eyes of society.

Despite the existence of these *subversive epics*, it remains problematic that women cannot recite the sacred epics that are considered to be the domain of men. *Sunjata* and many other epics remain off-limits to women regardless of the fact that they may be perfectly capable of reciting them. Sidikou explains, “If we do not yet have published versions of epics by African women, it is not because these narratives do not exist in the minds of the narrators. Rather, it is because the conditions for recounting them have not been welcoming for women” (128).

Women are generally limited to songs for and about women and to praise-singing.

Hale explains that *griottes*' public performances are comprised principally of praise-singing. He insists that praise-singing is, “more than simply a matter of voicing kind words about another person in exchange for rewards” (80). Hale claims that the nobles “feel the power of the griots' words, power that moves, that enables”, and that “the praise-singing reflects a complex relationship between two different groups in society” (80). This view, however, is difficult to reconcile with the image that Bâ and Diome have constructed of *griottes*. In their works noble women, not men, are the object of the *griottes*' attention. These women are not flattered by the *griottes*' praise, but rather find them to be a nuisance. Perhaps these characters reflect the attitudes of the authors themselves who view praise-singing as servile and petty. The authors' scorn is easier to understand in the context that Hale provides. He explains that while both male and female griots engage in praise-singing, the women who have become famous and have performed abroad tend to be exceptionally generous in praises for their patrons, more so

than male griots (82). As an example, Kandia Kouyaté, a Malian singer with an international reputation, produced a record consisting entirely of praise songs for one particular patron, Babani Sissoko (Hale 82). Incidentally, one of his gifts to her was a small airplane to allow her to visit him more easily (Hale 71). This kind of lavish gift-giving on the part of a man in exchange for lavish praise on the part of a woman creates a relationship that would make a woman seeking independence and respect feel uncomfortable. While such a gift might prompt suspicions of sexual dalliance, such was probably not the case as it is taboo in Mande society for individuals from different castes to engage in sexual relations. Rather, the gift seems to indicate a status of servility. In the world of orality, women appear to occupy a very low rank indeed.

Une Si Longue Lettre and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* address important issues and problems in society. They do not seek to praise the wealthy, powerful, or respected and the authors therefore distance themselves from association with *griottes*. While the male authors in the previous chapter took on the role of griot in order to validate traditional orality, such an approach doesn't make sense for a female author. Their message of women's empowerment and the need for changing views regarding women could not be communicated by one whose image was principally that of praise-singer. And while the *griottes'* protests about the plight of women in society are only heard by other women, Bâ and Diome, writing in French, seek a larger audience, both in West Africa and beyond. They are aware of the shortcomings of traditional orality in its treatment of women and avoid association with *griottes*, emphasizing instead the opportunities that literacy provides. Nevertheless, orality is present in both works, subverted to suit the authors' purposes. It seems that these authors want to keep the aspects of orality that involve the transmission of proverbs, songs, and stories from woman to woman, teaching them about their heritage and how to cope and be strong in their society. Conversely, they choose to

abandon the role of praise-singer and question the negative or limited role of women that is present in many works from the oral tradition.

In addition to demonstrating a woman's viewpoint concerning orality, *Une Si Longue Lettre* and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* also address history from women's perspectives. These perspectives can be better understood in the light of what we have learned about the relationship between women and orality and women's place in traditional society. The interwoven stories that make up *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* are often heart-breakingly sad, especially when they concern women. They illustrate the cruelty of tradition regarding women and all those who don't hold power in the society. The narrator, born out of wedlock, was raised by her grandmother. Her mother was forced into marriage with a man she didn't love while her father slipped away without consequence. She writes, "Trahie par ma grand-mère, la tradition, qui aurait voulu m'étouffer et déclarer un enfant mort-né à la communauté, maria ma mère à un cousin qui la convoitait de longue date" (74).

In another instance, the beautiful Sankèle was given by her father to the "homme de Barbès" who spent most of his time in France. Her mother opposed this plan, but was silenced by her husband. Diome comments, "Sur ce coin de la Terre, sur chaque bouche de femme est posée une main d'homme" (131). Women are not encouraged to express their opinions. But Sankèle was not afraid to resist. She loved another man and in order to prevent her planned marriage, became pregnant with his child. Her angry father snatched the baby boy at birth and suffocated him in a plastic bag. Sankèle ran away never to be seen again while her mother suffered silently. Diome explains, "Depuis ce jour-là, sa femme s'était réfugiée dans la forteresse du silence, laissant à ses larmes le soin de dire la profondeur de leur source" (134). Sankèle's mother had no outlet for her feelings: she certainly could not confide in her husband

and, as the family kept the scandal of Sankèle's pregnancy a secret, she could not confide in anyone else either. As an uneducated woman she couldn't read or write to escape her pain; her only recourse was silence. She did not speak again.

Another woman, Gnarelle, was eager to be remarried after her divorce, even though she would become her husband's second wife. And soon she was joined by a third wife, whom her husband received as "payment": "Un vieux paysan de Fimela, qui lui devait beaucoup d'argent depuis longtemps, venait de lui offrir la main de sa fille de seize ans. Qui a dit que le troc avait disparu de l'Afrique moderne ?" (148). Seeking to regain her husband's favors, Gnarelle turned to a marabout, a holy man who, for a price, could suggest the right sacrifices and pray the right prayers to intervene on her behalf. Diome notes, "Le match de la polygamie ne se joue jamais sans les marabouts" (148). Unfortunately, the marabout was a fraud and he used her not only for money, but also for sex. In this episode, women are manipulated and objectified by men, but instead of banding together the three wives turn against each other to fight for the affection of their husband. Anthropologist Marie-Denise Riss explains that being married is so important for a Senegalese woman because in addition to often being an economic necessity, marriage gives her status and a certain liberty. An unmarried woman remains a minor in the eyes of the law and loses her rights again on becoming widowed or divorced (51). Ideally, a woman will always be married and on the termination of a marriage, she will be pressured to marry again (41). This pressure from society often results in polygamy and in the silent suffering of women, as illustrated by Gnarelle's story.

Having children is very important to the women of Niodior. We have noted how the village women criticized and blamed Salie for not having any children during her brief marriage. She decided not to mention birth control, thinking, "Quelle bouche aurait osé nommer la pilule

devant elles, au risque de se tordre à vie ? Leur dire qu'en Europe on peut programmer et limiter les naissances aurait été perçu comme une provocation" (60). Salie comments about Niodior, "Le nombre d'enfants dans le village est impressionnant. Presque toutes les femmes en âge de procréer se promènent avec un bébé sur le dos ou sous la robe" (184). Part of the reason for this, apparently, is the religion taught at home. Salie remembers a day when she was in elementary school and the teacher asked the students what they wanted to be when they grew up. One little girl raised her hand to say, "Quand je serai grande, je ferai seulement maman, comme ma maman, et j'obéirai à mon mari pour aller au paradis, c'est ça qu'il a dit, mon père" (187). Concerning this idea Riss writes, "Le mariage est pour la femme une sécurité morale et religieuse (d'après les dires des femmes, le mariage doit leur permettre d'accéder au paradis grâce au mari)" (41). Riss also states, "Être mère est la condition d'épanouissement de la femme" (54). This confirms that the acceptable roles for women have not changed much since the time of Sunjata. They are still limited to a supporting role and thus prevented from reaching their full potential.

It is clear that one of the biggest challenges facing women in *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* is the lack of a public voice. They are forced to accept many things in virtual silence: marriage to a man they don't love, polygamy, the loss of a child, the birth of many more, endless chores, being unable to direct their own lives or the lives of their children, and being treated as sexual objects. So many instances of women without a voice seem to inspire the narrator to find hers. As a child, Salie was fascinated by Sokhna Dieng, one of the first female television journalists in Senegal. She remembers thinking, "une femme qui avait droit à la parole !" (189) While Salie may not have become a television journalist, as a novelist she found her "voice" and "speaks" (through writing) for women who still may lack their own. She shows that a woman doesn't

have to succumb to the pressure from those around her to behave in a certain way. She has no interest in remarrying and says so to anyone who approaches the subject. In many ways, she defies the traditional female roles of her culture and behaves more like a man. She travels as she pleases and when in the village she spends more time with the men than the women, finding them to be more compatible companions.

Perhaps even more significantly, Samuel Zadie points out that she interprets the idea of “la solidarité africaine” in her own way. He explains, “L’appel à résister à la pression communautaire est perceptible à travers l’attitude personnelle de la narratrice. Lorsque les villageois la pressent de partager son bien, la narratrice cède d’abord, mais fuit ensuite le centre de pression en mettant fin à ses vacances de manière prématurée” (184-5). Salie does not share all she has with the community, and she does not help her brother join her in France despite his repeated requests. Instead, she helps him in the way *she* wishes by saving up and sending him a significant sum to open a shop on the island, thus enabling him to earn his living independently. Zadie concludes:

Dans le cas de la narratrice, le volet individualiste de la solidarité modérée se manifeste par le refus de succomber aux pressions de la demande, par le travail personnel en vue d’améliorer ses propres conditions de vie et non celles de la communauté. C’est la réalisation de cette première condition [*sine qua non*] qui lui permet d’avoir les moyens d’exercer la solidarité. (186)

Once again she behaves outside the norm, favoring individualism over community. Salie wants the young people to remain in Senegal and build up their country, rather than experience the pain of exile and lack of belonging that she has. She doesn’t worry about what others want or how she will be perceived as she pursues her vision. Salie does things in her own way and in so

doing is able to give women a voice. The history presented in her novel is from a woman's perspective and reveals what life is really like for women in rural Senegal while promoting the hope offered by self-betterment.

It is equally important for Bâ to contribute a woman's perspective to understanding history through her novel. She states in the essay "Fonction politique des littératures africaines écrites" that the female writer, "droit, plus que ces pairs masculins, dresser un tableau de la condition de la femme africaine" (cited in D'Almeida 29). She certainly does that in *Une si longue lettre*, which brings to light many of the difficulties that Senegalese women face. As Wandia Njoya points out, it is a story about the tragedy of living with the consequences of decisions made in the passion of youth (454). Both Rama and Aïssatou marry for love, against the wishes of their families. The women and their husbands have Western educations and do not follow the traditional marriage procedures. However, this does not lead to liberated and happy lives for Rama and Aïssatou. Their husbands betray them through polygamy and the women have to deal with the resulting devastation to their worlds. Rama lives to regret not listening to her mother, who did not trust Modou: "Je ne ris plus des réticences de ma mère à ton égard, car une mère sent d'instinct où se trouve le bonheur de son enfant" (Bâ 25-26). Her western education led to a certain arrogance which blinded her to the traditional wisdom of her people. Rama's and Aïssatou's parallel situations illustrate that complete rejection of tradition is no better for women than is its unconditional acceptance.

While Bâ clearly criticizes polygamy in the novel, also a strong criticism of the French during colonial times, this criticism is not necessarily the result of western influence. As we've seen, women's songs for weddings and other ceremonies often criticize social practices. One

ceremony in particular, the *marchande* of Niger, which has equivalents in Senegal and throughout West Africa, is a protest of polygamy (Sidikou 46). Sidikou explains the ceremony:

It is a woman's ritual that dates back to the beginning of polygamy. It helps heal the psychological pain and wounds that the woman and all first wives go through when their husbands remarry. Through the gathering these women are taking a stand to support and sympathize with the one who is next about to receive a co-wife. (48)

This ceremony shows that African women have been unhappy with polygamy since its existence. Resentment of polygamy or marital infidelity seems to be a universal phenomenon, not the exclusive domain of western cultures. Njoya states, "Individual choice, separation, and divorce – even when exercised by women – are part of human nature and therefore not a rarity in Africa" (453). Rama is not out of line with tradition in resenting polygamy, although Aïssatou's rejection of it is unusual given that most women would not have that option.

The male characters in *Une Si Longue Lettre* also seem to be confused about what they want in a marriage. First they marry educated, independent women based on mutual affection even when their families are not in agreement, but then they either accept or seek out another union based on very different criteria. Njoya contends that their confusion stems from an internal conflict caused by colonial assimilation. Taught to embrace values that demeaned Africans and exalted the West, they began to believe in their own inferiority and even bestiality (455). A more straightforward explanation for the men's behavior, however, would simply be that they are returning to African traditions. For example, Aïssatou's husband Mawdo is strongly pressured by his mother to marry little Nabou who, unlike Aïssatou, has the proper family and upbringing for someone of his class. Rama's husband Modou acts alone in his

pursuit of Binetou, a school girl and classmate of his daughter, but on the day of the wedding he sends a delegation of respected men, including the local imam, to break the news to Rama. His future unequal treatment of his two wives is not in keeping with the expectations of tradition, but the second marriage itself is completely acceptable in his society.

Modou seems to be conflicted between two cultures from the beginning. During his studies in France, he writes to his then-fiancée Rama about the beauty of the white women. But then he reassures her that she is the one he loves, “C’est toi que je porte en moi. Tu es ma négresse protectrice” (25). Modou defies African tradition in both of his marriages: he gives no dowry to Rama and then abandons her when he marries Binetou, rather than equally dividing his time and resources between his two wives (Njoya 456). According to Njoya the distorted view of African traditions, marriage, and sexuality in Bâ’s novel is rooted in colonial assimilation (457). In their youth, the women rejected tradition too completely, only to regret it later, while the men first tried to assimilate with western-style marriages, but then struggled with inferiority complexes resulting from that attempted assimilation. In the end, they embraced polygamy, either because of family pressure or based on their own desires. And it was easy to do because it involved a simple return to the traditional practices of their people.

Perhaps because she is a woman, Rama is not greatly attached to tradition which, as we have seen, can be very cruel. She remembers fondly the white woman who ran the school that she and Aïssatou attended, where girls from all over French West Africa came for a university education. Rama explains what this woman did for them:

Nous sortir de l’enlissement des traditions, superstitions et mœurs ; nous faire apprécier de multiples civilisations sans reniement de la nôtre ; élever notre vision du monde, cultiver notre personnalité, renforcer nos qualités, mater nos défauts ;

faire fructifier en nous les valeurs de la morale universelle ; voilà la tâche que s'était assignée l'admirable directrice. (27-28)

This is high praise for one associated with the colonial government and shows that Rama was open to western ideas and found them to be particularly beneficial for women. She even speaks of her classmates as, “de véritable sœurs destinées à la même mission émancipatrice” (27). It is clear that Rama sees education as liberating and while she respects tradition, she is not dominated by it. Thus, one of the perspectives on history that *Une Si Longue Lettre* provides is the complex interplay between traditional and western wisdom that African women must navigate as they seek to better their lives.

Both Bâ and Diome bring a woman's perspective to history through their novels. They focus on relationships and the struggles of daily life, highlighting how women's lives are profoundly impacted by a past of colonialism and the society's history of chauvinism. They show through their works that literacy can lead to healing for African women. It provides a way to counter the negative image of women embodied in traditional orality. At the same time, by integrating references to orality throughout their texts, they validate their culture while not boxing themselves in. In a sense, Bâ and Diome do act as *griottes*, not praise singers but storytellers, speaking on behalf of all women, sharing their stories, and thus providing them with a public voice. Their novels could be seen as a continuation of the subversive epics described by Sidikou. In much the same way as those epics, *Une Si Longue Lettre* and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* offer images of courageous women in West African societies who can face and deal with crucial problems that hinder their progress. Researching the cultural context of these novels enables us to see that Bâ and Diome are continuing in a tradition of women's protest, despite

their seeming break from traditional orality. In fact, through the change of language and genre, they contribute to expanding the reach of women's voices from West Africa.

4. EXPRESSING LOSS: THE CHILD'S VOICE

Children are known for their candid statements, sometimes funny, sometimes revealing, and often unexpected. They offer a fresh perspective and do not conform to the norms of what is “politically correct” or socially acceptable, which may limit adult speech. What better narrator could express the tragedy of violence when it touches ordinary people in horrendous situations? As early as 1956, when Fernando Oyono published *Une Vie de boy*, in which child-narrator Toundi describes in a journal the violence he suffers at the hands of the colonists, African authors have used a child's voice to relate violent historic situations. The subject has evolved from colonial violence inflicted on the child to violence between Africans, often with the children taking part.

Victor Shklovsky coined the term “enstrangement” to describe a technique of narrating events from a fresh perspective. The choice of a child narrator, and by implication a child's point of view, has been used by Tolstoy and many others to overcome an adult's automatized perception of the world. Shklovsky describes Tolstoy's implementation of enstrangement: “He does not call a thing by its name, that is, he describes it as if it were perceived for the first time, while an incident is described as if it were happening for the first time” (6). Using a child or even an animal as narrator allows the author to present common events in all their strangeness, without the explicatory and justificatory ideology that adults automatically apply to what they see. It seems that by presenting war and violence through children's eyes, African authors are adding to this tradition.

Among the better known recent examples of novels narrated by children in extremely violent situations are *L'Aîné des orphelins* by Tierno Monémbo, set around the Rwandan genocide, *Allah n'est pas obligé* by Ahmadou Kourouma, dealing with child-soldiers in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and *Johnny Chien Méchant* by Emmanuel Dongala, concerned with child-soldiers and refugees in a country resembling the Congo. In the case of all these texts, the child narrators are orphans, are in search of possible family, or have no family ties. They are cut off not only from their families, but also from their culture as a result of the turmoil taking place in their countries.

These child narrators recount truly horrendous situations and events in a detached way, without emotion. It seems that the children, traumatized by what has happened to them, have a special voice. While children normally represent the future and the hope of humankind, the reader finds these child narrators in disturbing situations with neither. The association of youthful innocence with matter-of-factness about atrocities that these children bring to the narration can be quite shocking to the reader. Odile Cazenave explains that using a child narrator is an effective way for an author to recount the terrible events of history. The reader becomes aware of the importance of the past and of traditional values in the formation of a child's mind while taking in a portrayal of the current violence in a way that is easy to relate to personally: through the eyes of a child living the experience (61). The three novels featured in this chapter all speak to the importance of a traditional oral education and the devastating effects that a lack of knowledge about their roots and their oral traditions has on children. The child's voice, in all its ignorance, emphasizes the need for traditions while revealing the painful truth of violent situations in modern Africa.

The child's voice is especially poignant in *L'Aîné des orphelins* by Tierno Monénembo. This novel takes place in Rwanda in the years following the 1994 genocide. The narrator, Faustin, is a fifteen-year-old boy whom we meet in a prison cell in Kigali, waiting to be executed. We know that he is going to die at the start of the novel and therefore there is no illusion of hope for his future. The story Faustin tells is confused and disjointed, jumping back and forth between his wanderings in the street after the genocide, his innocent boyhood before the genocide, and his time in prison. The genocide itself, which he refers to only as "*les avènements*" is carefully avoided until the very end when Faustin reveals in a flood of memories how the Hutu militia came to his town and murdered the people taking refuge in the church, including his own parents. Faustin survived under the piles of dead bodies only to later be condemned to death for the murder of a friend.

L'aîné des orphelins was written as part of the collective project "Écrire par devoir de mémoire", initiated by the association Arts et Médias d'Afrique and supported by the Fondation de France which, through the program "Initiative d'artiste", invited artists and writers from all over Africa to travel to Rwanda in 1998 and eventually produce a work relating to the memory of the genocide. The idea was to end the silence about the Rwandan genocide on the part of African artists and intellectuals. It was time for Africans to express their perspectives on this horrible part of African history, and Monénembo makes his contribution through this novel.

Monénembo integrates orality into the novel in part through Faustin's rambling narration. The disjointed episodes and informal style of the narration evoke an oral story, recounted before a few sympathetic listeners. The narrator does not seem like a griot however; he is just a child who does not fully understand the story he retells. His comical mispronunciation of big words like *pédrophile*, *taumatrismes*, *Ouatican*, *péliciline*, *busenessman*, etc. makes this clear.

Sometimes however, his misspellings seem to hit the mark as in *Notions-Unies*. In this use of enstrangement, Faustin's innocent error brings to light criticism of the United Nations' intervention as more "notional" than real.

It is the character Funga who represents Rwanda's traditional oral culture in the novel. Faustin, evoking what he learned in church as a young child, calls Funga a sorcerer and a liar and is careful to protect himself from him saying, "des diables de païens de son espèce [...] hantaient encore le village cent ans après l'arrivée des Blancs ! Je tremblais malgré tout quand je le voyais manier ses crânes de tortue et ses cornes d'antilope" (15). Faustin has been taught to shun and fear his ancestral traditions. Despite this, Funga never tires of telling his stories, especially the legend of the sacred rock of Kagera. Faustin remembers, "Personne ne doit déplacer le rocher sacré de la Kagera ! Les Blancs qui savaient cela l'ont fait exprès. Voilà pourquoi ils nous ont vaincus et voilà pourquoi les cataclysmes" (19). While Faustin never paid much attention to Funga's stories at the time, his bringing them up later reveals their importance to him.

Despite Faustin's attitude towards him, Funga is farsighted and compassionate, trying on several occasions to help Faustin and his parents, but never able to get through to them. The last thing he says to Faustin is, "Alors, promets-moi de le remettre un jour à sa place, le rocher de la Kagera!" (19). Funga escapes from Rwanda over the mountains and takes the old traditions with him. Faustin becomes a delinquent teen in Kigali where there seem to be no traditions left at all. The loss of his traditional culture is part of Faustin's tragedy; he is left to stumble along in life with no guidance or roots. But he does not forget Funga. In fact, Faustin refers constantly to the old man throughout his story. During his first few days in prison, confronted with the repulsive and dangerous conditions, Faustin finds comfort in the oral tradition:

Du fond de mon âme, une voix me disait alors : « Tiens bon, fils de Théoneste ! Encore un ou deux jours et tu auras bel et bien crevé ! Les morts ne souffrent pas, ils se reposent d'avoir vécu. » C'était peut-être la voix du sorcier Funga. Funga est tout ce qui me reste, maintenant qu'il n'y a plus rien, ni la maison où je suis né ni le fronton de l'église. Je ne dois pas douter de lui : ce sont ses gris-gris qui me protègent. (27)

It is revealing that Faustin clings to Funga's words in his moments of distress, more so than to memories of his family or the church where he served as altar boy. And when his memories about the genocide are finally revealed at the end of the novel, Faustin again remembers Funga's words to his father, Théoneste:

Si tu me survivs, Théoneste, pense à remettre à la bonne place ce rocher de la Kagera ! Sinon, ce n'est pas seulement pour le village qu'il faut craindre mais pour la terre entière. Des choses étranges défilent sous mes yeux : des êtres hybrides, des fleuves de sang charriant des montagnes de têtes vidées de leurs yeux. Ah, c'est de notre faute à nous autres anciens ! Nous avons négligé les dieux, ces derniers temps. Nous avons servi celui des autres. Nous le paierons ! (146-7)

Funga wants his people to go back to the old ways. He regrets the progress that made people forget about their traditions, culture, and religion. Since Faustin remembers the words of Funga at key moments, perhaps he too places value on his traditional culture now that he is about to die. Through Funga, Monénembo expresses the value of the traditional oral culture in Rwanda and the importance of passing those traditions on to one's children.

Another way that we see the traditional orality of Rwanda in the novel is through Faustin's extensive use of proverbs in his narration. He remembers them as frequently spouted by his father or by Funga and cites them appropriately with phrases like, "Mon père Théoneste disait" or "Le vieux Funga a raison". In this way the child narrator integrates these "paroles des anciens" into his story:

Me revint à l'esprit le fameux mot de mon père : 'La barbe n'est pas tout, non ! S'il en était ainsi, le bouc serait le plus sage du village !' (38)

Le vieux Funga a raison : 'Le monde, il marche, même si c'est souvent de travers.' (49)

La fable de mon vaurien de Théoneste de père est encore toute fraîche dans ma tête : 'Mensonge et Vérité sont les premiers habitants de la terre. Vérité est le frère aîné, mais comme Mensonge est le plus doué, eh bien, c'est lui qui mène le monde. N'oublie jamais ça, petit !' (104)

'Le malheur fait penser à la pluie : contrairement aux apparences, il n'est jamais subit', me disait le vieux Funga. 'Cela vient toujours d'une succession de petites choses qui s'accumulent, qui s'accumulent, et, un beau jour, ça déborde et voici que l'eau gicle de partout ou bien alors le sang.' (110)

Comme disait Théoneste, mon père : 'Le borgne est plus proche de l'aveugle que des gens bien portants.' (136)

'Si tu hais un homme, laisse-le vivre !', voilà ce que disaient les anciens. (142)

The presence of these and many more proverbs throughout the narration reveals their importance to Faustin. He remembers them as the words of his father and Funga, but uses them to tell his own story. It is clear that he longs for a connection to the old traditions and to the people who

taught him those traditions. Orality is still important to this hardened, street-wise orphan boy. Although he himself does not seem to know what he wants from life, his use of the proverbs reveals that he longs for a connection to his family, his culture, and his past. Monénembo's integration of these proverbs and frequent references to Funga throughout the novel grounds it in the past, despite all its modernity, and highlights the importance of orality for the future of Rwanda.

Even the overall theme of the novel – an orphan trying to make his way through life – relates to traditional orality. Cazenave notes:

In traditional legends or folktales, the child has often been depicted as an orphan, a wandering child without family or love, sometimes brutalized by a stepmother or the co-spouses of his mother. Folktales like “Le Pagne noir” and “La Cruche cassée” show an orphan child or a neglected, unloved child who is to experience the difficult path of ordeals, sacrifice, and, eventually, heroism. (62)

What is different in Monénembo's novel, of course, is the lack of a hopeful ending. The future does not look bright for these children propelled into a spiral of violence.

The future looks equally grim for Rwandan oral literature. Danielle de Lame notes that during colonialism and later under continuing Western influence, this literature was suppressed. She laments, “The only noteworthy form of art possessed by the [Rwandan] people was a brilliant oral literature, which exploited, with the greatest finesse, all the potential of a complex language. That literature was, however, almost completely lost” (294). De Lame explains that many factors contributed to this loss as practices changed under Western influence: the lack of opportunities for oral performances, the censure and self-censure of any aspects that could be classified as “pagan” or “immoral”, a depreciation of popular culture, and a devaluation of court

culture (294). The First Republic made no attempt to reinstate the oral literature that had been repressed under colonial rule and within a few generations the people's cultural past had been virtually erased, subsisting only underground and well off the beaten path (295). Knowing this about the state of Rwandan oral literature helps the reader understand why Funga struggled to preserve the old traditions and why he was often shunned and ridiculed and deemed a "sorcerer". It also explains Faustin's clinging to the old man's words following his departure. Funga was his best link to the past and even a child understands the need for a past in order to build a future. The loss of Rwanda's oral literature is brought out in the novel and is part of Rwanda's tragedy. Not having a common past on which to build makes it easier for those in power to manipulate history and perpetuate their ideology, and this is precisely what happened in Rwanda.

Rwandan history is very complex and full of competing versions. Sorting through it can be challenging. According to David Newbury, Rwanda is "an area where history is particularly contested, contorted, and misconstrued, an area where debates over history have been a central feature of the recent cataclysms that have wracked the region" (282). This could be due, at least in part, to the loss of Rwanda's oral literature. It seems that the two ethnicities pitted against each other in the years leading up to the genocide, the Hutu and the Tutsi, are not historically very different one from the other. They speak the same language, practice the same customs and religion, and come from the same places. Newbury explains that clans and regional differences were traditionally more important than ethnicity for distinguishing between individuals until dynastic, colonial, and postcolonial authorities sought to subordinate regional identities to a national one (293). How then did hatred develop between these groups to produce genocide on the scale witnessed in 1994?

Catharine Newbury explains that history plays a key role, having been used and distorted by competing groups to manipulate Rwandans since colonial times. As she puts it, “Here, with an intensity that surpasses the normal clichés, there is no single history; rather there are competing ‘histories’” (9). Newbury goes on to outline two contrasting views of the history of relations between the three main ethnic groups in Rwanda:

One view holds that in the precolonial past, Tutsi lived in symbiosis and harmony with Hutu and Twa. European colonialism created cleavages and divisions between Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa and also put an end to the social mobility that had been possible in the past. Therefore, some who use this line of reasoning assert, in order to overcome the divisions that have led to violence, the ethnic categories should simply be abolished and the terminology of ethnic groups forbidden.

A different version of these relationships asserts that Hutu were conquered in the distant past by clever and wily Tutsi, who imposed an oppressive, exploitative rule on Hutu and made them the servants of Tutsi. Colonial rule under Germany and then Belgium exacerbated and intensified (but did not cause) divisions that were already there. From this perspective, abolishing the terms “Hutu,” “Tutsi,” and “Twa” is portrayed as a ploy promoted by a historically dominant minority trying to maintain power. Given the history of discrimination in Rwandan society, some proponents of this view have argued, it is only by retaining the categories that one can measure progress in redressing inequalities from the past. (9-10)

The first version is promoted by those wishing to rationalize rule by the Tutsi minority, while the second comes from those in favor of the Hutu-dominated governments that ruled Rwanda from 1961 to 1994. Interestingly, notes Newbury, at various times hardliners on both sides have

accepted the propaganda introduced by colonial authorities about ethnic pasts: “Tutsi were from different racial stock; they came to Rwanda from the northeast; and they were superior to Hutu in both intelligence and political abilities” (10). The Europeans favored the Tutsi throughout the colonial period, creating growing resentment among the Hutu. Nicholas A. Jones confirms:

The Belgians, like the Germans, were impressed with the Tutsi’s ruling monarchy and viewed it as evidence of their superior nature. Their policies demonstrated an even greater affinity with the Tutsi than had been present under German rule. The Belgian colonial rule was responsible for the institutionalization of the concept of ethnicity that intensified the contentious divide between the Hutus and Tutsis.

(21)

Ethnic divisions did not end with independence, as the ruling Hutu party continued to use them to consolidate their power. This propaganda about the ethnicities led to increasing hostility between the groups and, eventually, genocide.

There are also two different interpretations of the Rwandan Revolution of 1959, which led to the independence of Rwanda from Belgium. While the Tutsi version highlights the role of Belgian colonial authorities and the Catholic Church in instituting reforms, the Hutu view emphasizes the importance of Hutu leaders who demanded equal access to employment, education, and political power for the disenfranchised masses (C. Newbury 9). It is clear that these views reflect political positions rather than valid historical reconstructions as each side seeks to use history to justify its position. The ethnic polarization of the 1990s was in many respects a continuation of the evolving tensions of late colonial rule. By using history to explain ethnic differences and to justify ethnic violence, those in power (the Hutu elite) found an internal scapegoat (the Tutsi) to protect their own interests (C. Newbury 15). The history between the

ethnicities was continuously distorted to rally the people around a cause, leading to increasing divisions and escalating tensions as moderates were marginalized. The history surrounding the genocide remains contentious and many questions about what exactly happened remain unresolved to this day. Jones notes that despite the creation of a dominant historical perspective in a given era, an alternative interpretation of events continues to exist and could rise to a more prominent existence as power structures and politics evolve (17).

The ruling elite used propaganda about ethnicity to maintain their power and privilege in increasingly difficult economic times. Perhaps this is why Monémbo virtually ignores the ethnic dimension of the genocide in his novel. The reader does not learn whether Faustin is Hutu or Tutsi until a few pages from the end of the book. As it turns out he is both, having a Tutsi mother and a Hutu father. Théoneste deemphasizes the importance of ethnicity when his son questions him about it, saying, “Ça veut pas dire grand-chose, Hutu ou Tutsi, c’est comme si tu perdais ton temps à comparer l’eau et l’eau” (139). Ethnicity is portrayed as a gimmick, used by the elite to manipulate the masses. By showing that ethnicity really doesn’t mean much, Monémbo emphasizes the absurdity of the violence.

Monémbo does not get caught up in the politically fraught debate surrounding the history leading up to the genocide. He does not describe its causes or progression, nor does he identify most of his characters’ ethnicity. History in *L’Aîné des orphelins* is limited to the perspective of a traumatized young boy and thus the novel focuses not on the genocide itself, but on the effects the genocide has on a child. Only a few scattered clues throughout the book speak to the conditions that led up to the genocide and only the last few pages describe the “avènements”. The rest of the novel is dedicated to their aftermath. Faustin is damaged: hard and calloused, vulgar, rude, difficult to relate to, impossible to get through to. He lies, steals,

cheats, sleeps with the neighborhood girls and thinks nothing of it, then shoots his best friend for sleeping with his sister.

Faustin's voice is challenging to listen to. He shows little sentimentality and does not ask for pity. Audrey Small notes that both the life and vocabulary of this fifteen-year-old are brutal and that what he has to say is necessarily shocking (203). When aid-worker Claudine wonders how the genocide could have happened, Faustin replies, "Ben parce que nous aimons ça !" (31) He speaks in a very vulgar way throughout the novel, recounting the upheaval of daily life after the genocide as if it were perfectly ordinary. In a cavalier way he describes his life with the other street children:

Les filles cuisinaient pendant que nous nous racontions des blagues en fumant de l'herbe ou en reniflant de la colle. Josépha, Gabrielle, Alphonsine et Émilienne étaient les plus jolies. Je culbutais l'une ou l'autre quand les autres s'étaient endormis ou alors au marché quand nous nous y attardions pour ramasser d'éventuelles pièces de monnaie. Ce furent des moments heureux, parmi les plus beaux de mon existence. A tel point qu'il m'arrivait rarement de penser à mes parents. (55-56)

Descriptions like this are deeply troubling to the reader, but Faustin does not seem to be traumatized or upset. There is, however, something that jars in his narration. The constant jumping back and forth in space and time reveals Faustin's unwillingness to confront what happened to him head-on. He tells his story in circles, always carefully skirting the genocide. He is not unaffected by what happened that day, but prefers to put it out of his mind.

Actually, Faustin does talk about the genocide, but only in the form of lies invented for profit. In a troubling sequence, Faustin follows Rodney, a British cameraman, to "les sites de

génocide” where he reinvents his story over and over again for the camera. He even accuses random people he sees of having killed his father or raped his mother. As Rodney says, “Tu mens comme tu respires, Faustin!” (107). Faustin makes himself utterly despicable at times. And yet, the reader does catch glimpses through his narration of the shy but joyful little boy he was before. Faustin relates how he named his soccer team:

C’est moi qui avais trouvé le nom de notre équipe. L’entraîneur voulait l’appeler le Tonnerre. Cela ne me plaisait pas (des Tonnerre, y en a partout dans les stades d’Afrique, même chez les mangeurs de macabo de Yaoundé). Surmontant pour une fois mon horrible timidité, je bondis des rangs et dis de ma voix frêle mais ce jour-là étonnamment persuasive : « Appelons-la le Minime Système de Nyamata, oh, s’il vous plaît, Monsieur ! » (21)

This and other references to the younger and more innocent version of Faustin show just how changed he is as a result of what he went through.

Faustin’s innocence is underscored by his incomprehension of many of the words he uses in the story. As we noted earlier, his charming mispronunciations remind us that he is only a child and as such his understanding of the genocide is quite limited. Additionally, Small points out that while children are normally associated with innocence and vulnerability, Faustin externalizes his vulnerability in his bravado (208). His tough voice is part of his cover and in a sense it makes him more childlike. Nevertheless, notes Michael Syrotinski, the “true” Faustin remains hidden, even from himself (435). The reader is at something of a loss to understand him.

Faustin seems less and less human as the novel progresses, culminating in his trial for murder. The trial makes it clear that Faustin sees himself as an adult, answering to no one.

When one of the judges asks Faustin what living means to him, he replies, “Manger un bon plat d’*umushagoro*, se soûler à sa guise et culbuter la femme que l’on aime sans que la justice s’en mêle !” (137). Faustin behaves in an unbearable way for a child of his age. Syrotinski notes that the judges find themselves in the same position as the reader: trying vainly to understand the adolescent and to make sense of his world (436). But the task is daunting and Faustin is so unsympathetic that any consideration of his age is swept aside. He is condemned to death thanks to his audacious rudeness and complete lack of social awareness.

Interestingly, the country of Rwanda actually abolished the death penalty in 2007. While the laws in place at the time of the genocide in 1994 provided that those who killed should suffer the ultimate punishment, this would have resulted in the loss of many more in addition to the estimated one million victims. So the law was changed while the judicial system was still overwhelmed with suspected *génocidaires*. As reported in *New Times (Rwanda)* president Paul Kagame explains:

Regardless of the extreme circumstances, there is no doubting the social consequences that would have accompanied such a mass execution. What we needed most was a way to punish crime, end impunity, heal the physical and emotional wounds of survivors of the genocide and deliver justice to all. [...] The government could not become a mass executioner in order to correct mass murder. So we chose to break with the past and abolish the death penalty in order to move forward.

It seems that the judges presiding Faustin’s trial were not in tune with the trend that later became law in Rwanda. Faustin is not a perpetrator of the genocide. Considering that he is only fifteen,

orphaned by the genocide, and that he killed to defend his sister who, along with two younger siblings, is the only family he has left, the death penalty is a shocking outcome.

There is no simple solution to how to deal with Faustin. Lisa McNee notes that he is “both victim and murderer, child and man, innocent and guilty” (2). The judges who condemn him to death take a simplistic view, not recognizing the impossible complexity of his situation. One of the judges seems to compare him to those who took part in the genocide, exclaiming, “Ah! Il t’arrive tout de même de regretter! ... Ta propre vie, bien entendu, sûrement pas celle de ta victime! Tu es un monstre, Faustin ! Tu ne mérites pas d’appartenir au genre humain !” (137). McNee notes that through this comparison of killing one person with the genocide, the judge trivializes the genocide and ignores the differing motives (4-5). While Faustin’s behavior, taken out of context, is incomprehensible, there is a context of which the judges are surely aware.

In the last few pages of the novel, Faustin recounts that context: the genocide that changed his life. The novel’s tone changes to become very touching as Faustin’s narration transforms from a tone of bravado to one of innocence and vulnerability. The reader at last learns what exactly happened to him and how his parents died. This story changes everything and we begin to understand Faustin’s tragedy. At ten years of age he witnessed the murder of his parents and most of his community while he was spared by chance. He is most certainly a traumatized child, profoundly impacted by historic events.

The child narrator of *L’Aîné des orphelins* is a victim of genocide and its consequences. His voice reaches us through an adolescent’s bravado which masks the profound wounds from which he suffers. His desire to avoid the past inhibits his memory from functioning normally. He invents lies and talks about everything except what is almost impossible to confront: his own experience of the genocide. His voice cannot express hope for the future like that of an ordinary

child. Rather, it reveals the depth of the wounds that traumatic events leave on their victims. Faustin's age makes the situation all the more poignant and we find that his child's voice is particularly powerful in transmitting the devastation of genocide.

The references to orality throughout the novel emphasize the importance of preserving one's past. A child needs to know where he came from in order to develop an identity. In addition, the loss of oral literature makes it easier for a few to control and manipulate history. The lack of attention to ethnicity in the novel puts emphasis on the arbitrary nature of the genocide and questions the assumptions most of us have about the conflict being based on ethnicity. It is rather based on the manipulation of the uneducated masses by the elite. The people are uneducated in their own culture and history and therefore are particularly vulnerable to manipulation.

We can observe the same vulnerability and lack of self-knowledge in *Allah n'est pas obligé* and *Johnny Chien Méchant*. While Faustin did not participate in the genocide, only becoming violent afterwards, the child-narrators in these novels do take part as soldiers in their countries' civil wars. Their experiences reiterate the need for children to be educated in their culture, portraying the profound loss that results when this education lacks.

Allah n'est pas obligé by Ahmadou Kourouma, is Birahima's story, recounted in his broken French mixed with occasional words in Malinké, other African languages, and English. As in his previous novels (see *Les Soleils des indépendances* and *Monnè, outrages et défis* in chapter 5) Kourouma uses an innovative, "Africanized" French to achieve an authentic narration. Birahima, not sure if he is ten or twelve years old, is an orphan boy from Guinea in search of his aunt whose wanderings take him through Liberia and Sierra Leone where he becomes a child-soldier for a time. His voice is often insolent, but maintains a child-like innocence as he reveals

the painful truth behind the devastating conflicts in these two countries. In the course of his quest he acquires four dictionaries and decides to write down his experiences, making use of the dictionaries, presumably, so that his story can reach the maximum possible number of people.

He explains with his usual insolence :

C'est alors qu'a germé dans ma caboche (ma tête) cette idée mirifique de raconter mes aventures de A à Z. De les conter avec les mots savants français de français, toubab, colon, colonialiste et raciste, les gros mots d'africain noir, nègre, sauvage, et les mots de nègre de salopard de pidgin. (233)

With the help of the dictionaries, he fills his pages with parenthetical explanations of words and expressions for both African and Western readers:

(J'explique aux Africains noirs indigènes le mot risque. Il signifie danger, inconvéniént possible.) (151)

(Scabreux signifie indécent, osé, d'après le Petit Robert) (65)

Avec méfiance et hésitation dans le ventre, disent les Africains, et dans le cœur, disent les Français. (28-9)

(Djoko-djoko signifie de toute manière d'après Inventaire des particularités.) (67)

(Se ceinturer fort est une expression des noirs nègres africains qui signifie, d'après Inventaire, prendre la chose au sérieux, prendre le taureau par les cornes.) (157)

Birahima's reliance on the dictionaries indicates not only a desire to demonstrate his book-learning, but also a lack of confidence in his own voice. Perhaps due to his limited schooling, he seems to constantly feel the need to reinforce what he is saying with explanations and commentary. The dictionaries also remind us that he is not writing in his native language of Malinké and therefore struggles to express himself in French.

Birahima's voice often reveals his immaturity: "Moi non plus, je ne suis pas obligé de parler, de raconter ma chienne de vie, de fouiller dictionnaire sur dictionnaire. J'en ai marre; je m'arrête ici pour aujourd'hui. Qu'on aille se faire foutre!" (101), but also his insightful observations of human nature: "Un groupe de bandits de grand chemin, de criminels de la pire espèce, pleurer comme ça. Il fallait voir ça, ça valait le détour" (135), and a clear picture of the dismal situations he finds himself in: "C'était déjà quatre heures du matin et le putain de soleil prêt à se pointer sur ce maudit pays du Liberia de la guerre tribale" (149). And his explanations, based as they are on his observations of how things really work, are full of irony: "(Ingérence humanitaire, c'est le droit qu'on donne à des États d'envoyer des soldats dans un autre État pour aller tuer des pauvres innocents chez eux, dans leur propre pays, dans leur propre village, dans leur propre case, sur leur propre natte.)" (138). Birahima's young voice, despite (and because of) its immaturity and poor grammar, effectively portrays life in war-ravaged Liberia and Sierra Leone.

The narrator's broken French makes it clear that his education is severely lacking. He blames the unemployment that haunts educated and uneducated alike as the reason for his dropping out of school, and yet he does seem to long for an education as he collects the dictionaries and writes his memoir. He laments:

Mais fréquenter jusqu'à cours élémentaire deux n'est pas forcément autonome et mirifique. On connaît un peu, mais pas assez ; on ressemble à ce que les nègres noirs africains indigènes appellent une galette aux deux faces braisées. On n'est plus villageois, sauvages comme les autres noirs nègres africains indigènes : on entend et comprend les noirs civilisés et les toubabs sauf les Anglais comme les Américains noirs du Liberia. Mais on ignore géographie, grammaire,

conjugaisons, divisions et rédaction ; on n'est pas fichu de gagner l'argent facilement comme agent de l'État dans une république foutue et corrompue comme en Guinée, en Côte d'Ivoire, etc., etc. (10)

Birahima seems like a bright child who could have done well in school, as his determination to write his memoir shows. On one occasion, he even refers to a piece of French literature: "Ce n'était pas juste ; c'était la raison du plus fort comme dans la fable de La Fontaine « Le Loup et l'Agneau » que nous avons apprise à l'école" (155). But most often, his cultural references come from African sources:

Yacouba était riche comme un moro-naba. Moro-naba, c'est le chef cossu des Mossis du Burkina Faso. (78)

On aurait cru que c'étaient les guerres samoriennes qui étaient revenues. (Samory était un chef malinké qui s'est opposé aux conquêtes françaises pendant la pénétration française et dont les sofas – soldats – tiraient beaucoup.) (97)

Tout le monde a continué à dormir du sommeil du champion lutteur sénégalais qui a vaincu tous ceux de sa génération. (191)

Through these references, Birahima demonstrates his interest in and knowledge of African culture. Like Faustin, he holds onto the orality of his culture through the generous use of African proverbs and expressions in his narration. Some of the proverbs follow:

Balla disait qu'on n'abandonne pas la case de sa maman à cause des odeurs d'un pet. (18)

Un pet sorti des fesses ne se rattrape jamais. (28)

Le chien n'abandonne jamais sa façon déhontée de s'asseoir (153).

On suit l'éléphant dans la brousse pour ne pas être mouillé par la rosée (ce qui signifie qu'on est protégé lorsqu'on est proche d'un grand). (173)

Comme dit un proverbe des noirs nègres indigènes, c'est Sani Abacha qui était sous la pluie et c'était Houphouët-Boigny qui tirait les poissons de la rivière (183)

Des tâches aussi dures que de mettre une abeille dans les yeux d'un patient, dit un proverbe des nègres noirs indigènes et sauvages (187).

In addition to the proverbs, African expressions abound in the narration and, thanks to the dictionaries, are almost always accompanied by explanations:

Parce que ses sacrifices étaient exaucés. (Chez les Africains indigènes noirs, c'est quand les sacrifices qu'on fait sont exaucés qu'on a beaucoup de chance.) (42)

(Au village, faire la retraite de l'initiation signifie considérer comme un vrai copain.) (57)

(Au village, quand quelque chose n'a pas d'importance, on dit qu'il ne vaut pas le pet d'une vieille grand-mère. Je l'ai expliqué une fois déjà, je l'explique encore.) (66)

Et ça tombait juste et bien comme les mangues au mois d'avril. (88)

(Chez les nègres africains, on appelle une surprise désagréable ce qui mord sans avoir de dents.) (174)

A partir de ce jour, Kabbah le président élu peut dormir les yeux complètement fermés, dormir du sommeil du bébé de la laitière. (Le bébé de la laitière dort en paix parce qu'il sait qu'il aura du lait quoi qu'il arrive.) (190)

Nous et le bonheur avons cessé d'être dans le même village. (C'est comme ça disent les indigènes nègres noirs pour raconter que nous avons perdu le bonheur.) (203)

These expressions infuse the narration with Malinké culture and provide a window of insight into the life of the village in which Birahima spent his youngest years.

In addition to the African proverbs and expressions, another element of Birahima's narration that recalls traditional orality is the presence of several recurring words and phrases that act as refrains throughout the novel:

Allah n'est pas obligé d'être juste dans toutes ses choses ici-bas.

Gnamokodé (bâtardise) !

Faforo (sexe de son père) !

Walahé (au nom d'Allah) !

Allah dans son immense bonté ne laisse jamais vide une bouche qu'il a créée.

C'est la guerre tribale qui veut ça.

Nous (c'est-à-dire le féticheur musulman, le bandit boiteux Yacouba et moi,

l'enfant de rue, le small-soldier, l'enfant-soldat sans peur ni reproche).

These phrases are repeated, with slight variations, throughout the narration, tying it together in much the same way as a griot, using a refrain, ties together an oral story. Other phrases serve as refrains for specific anecdotes in the novel, such as: "L'alcool n'était pas bon pour le colonel Papa le bon" (89), and "(Il s'en fout, il tient la Sierra Leone utile !)" (182). Most of the refrains underscore the hopelessness of the situations, making it seem as though nothing can change the circumstances and imbuing the novel with a sense of fatality. No matter what happens, the situation remains unchanged, as testified by the repetition of these refrains.

One refrain, often repeated when Birahima remembers fallen child soldiers in his "oraisons funèbres" is particularly heartbreaking. He concludes his accounts of their lives with a variation of this refrain: "Quand on n'a pas de père, de mère, de frère, de sœur, de tante, d'oncle,

quand on n'a pas de rien du tout [...], le mieux est de devenir un enfant-soldat. Les enfants-soldats, c'est pour ceux qui n'ont plus rien à foutre sur la terre et dans le ciel d'Allah" (125).

Most of the child soldiers, like Birahima, are orphans and, for them, the army takes the place of school and family, with the army chiefs becoming like parents. This results in a new culture, with new practices, becoming dominant in the lives of the children, replacing their traditional culture.

Birahima, having left the village while still in his early formative years, is somewhat limited in his knowledge about his own culture. While he remembers some things, like the way the Malinké greet each other with “des salutations kilométriques” (131), he relies heavily on his reference books to explain many of the particularities of his own culture to his readers:

(Les nègres noirs africains indigènes prétendent que des noirs africains se transforment la nuit en hiboux et prennent l'âme de leurs proches et vont la manger dans le feuillage des grands fromagers, des grands arbres du village. Définition de mangeur d'âmes d'après Inventaire des particularités.) (140)

Or, depuis le dixième siècle, il se trouve en Sierra Leone, comme dans tous les pays de l'Afrique de l'Ouest, une franc-maçonnerie (franc-maçonnerie signifie association ésotérique et initiatique) groupant les chasseurs, ces grands initiés, ces puissants magiciens et devins, c'est le Kamajor. (189-90)

C'était un Malinké et, chez les Malinkés, lorsque quelqu'un porte le nom de Diabaté, il est de la caste des griots (caste, classe sociale fermée ; c'est-à-dire qu'il est de père en fils griot et qu'il n'a pas le droit de se marier à une autre qui ne soit pas griote). (229)

These cultural explanations show that Birahima is trying to understand his heritage and is not completely cut off from his roots. He remembers his parents and family and the people of his village. Most of all he talks about Balla, a traditional healer similar to Funga in *L'Aïné des orphelins*. Balla was a friend to Birahima and his mother, but when the boy wants to live with Balla upon the death of his mother, the village elders do not agree. He explains, “Cela grand-mère était contre, elle voulait m'éloigner, me faire quitter Balla pour que je ne devienne pas un Bambara, un féticheur non croyant au lieu de rester un vrai Malinké qui fait bien ses cinq prières par jour” (36). Ironically, it is due to her desire for her grandson to remain a “true” Malinké that the grandmother sends Birahima to live with his aunt in Liberia, where he loses his culture more completely.

In order to leave his village in compliance with tradition, Birahima must first be circumcised and initiated in a traditional ceremony. Upon having completed this rite with a group of boys his age, Birahima is ready to set off: “Nous n'étions plus des bilakoros, nous étions des initiés, des vrais hommes. Et moi, je pouvais quitter le village sans choquer personne, sans que personne jase” (37). In a distortion of its original purpose, Birahima undergoes this initiation simply in order to leave. Koffi Anyinefa notes, “Si l'initiation ne sert plus à garantir sa place à l'enfant dans la société, mais à le conduire à l'exil, elle ne sert plus sa fonction sociale et psychologique” (90). The society seems to be unraveling: only old people and children remain in the village while the young people are eager, or even urged, to leave. Many of them end up as soldiers in the conflict zones. As the army takes the place of traditional structures in these young people's lives, they replace traditional rites with perverted versions of them. For example, in order to join the “lycaons de la révolution”, an elite group of child-soldiers, one must first kill his father or mother with his own hands. Then an initiation takes place:

L'initiation du petit lycaon se fait dans un bois. Il porte des jupes en raphia, ça chante, danse et ça coupe fort les mains et les bras des citoyens sierra-léonais. Ça consomme après une boule de viande, une boule de viande qui est sûrement de la chair humaine. (188-189)

This violent perversion of a traditional initiation ceremony appeals to the wandering children as it makes them a part of a new family. Birahima regrets that his parents are already dead and therefore he cannot kill them in order to join this elite group. It becomes increasingly clear that, as a result of his experiences as a child-soldier, Birahima has rejected his culture. He states in his insolent way:

Un enfant poli écoute, ne garde pas la palabre... Il ne cause pas comme un oiseau gendarme dans les branches de figuier. Ça, c'est pour les vieux aux barbes abondantes et blanches, c'est ce que dit le proverbe : le genou ne porte jamais le chapeau quand la tête est sur le cou. C'est ça les coutumes au village. Mais moi depuis longtemps je m'en fous des coutumes du village, entendu que j'ai été au Liberia, que j'ai tué beaucoup de gens avec kalachnikov (ou kalach) et me suis bien camé avec kanif et les autres drogues dures. (11)

Birahima has changed as a result of the power he experienced with a gun in his hands. He cannot go back to being a respectful child who listens to his elders. As a result he will not hear their traditional stories and wisdom and many aspects of his culture will be lost to him.

History in *Allah n'est pas obligé* is presented in Birahima's voice, but not always through his eyes. He provides background information about the conflicts in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, setting the stage for his arrival, and it is not clear what his source(s) for this information might be. Since Birahima is known to exaggerate and even lie outright, his voice is unreliable.

The reader is left unsure about his version of events. Here, Birahima describes the state of mind of Liberian coup leader Samuel Doe:

Dans sa capital Monrovia, Samuel Doe régna peinard pendant cinq plein hivernages. Partout il allait en tenue de parachutiste et le revolver à la ceinture, comme un vrai révolutionnaire. Mais un jour il pensa à Thomas Quionkpa... pensa à Thomas Quionkpa et, du coup, se renfrogna, se trouva mal à l'aise dans sa tenue de parachutiste. Il ne faut pas oublier que Samuel Doe avait réussi le coup avec Thomas Quionkpa et Thomas Quionkpa était toujours là. Même les voleurs de poulets de la basse-cour le savent et se le disent : quand on réussit un coup mirifique avec un second, on ne jouit pleinement du fruit de la rapine qu'après avoir éliminé ce second. Après cinq ans de règne, l'existence de Thomas Quionkpa continuait à poser des problèmes au moral, au parler, aux comportements du général Samuel Doe. (105-106)

How Birahima obtained this insider information about Doe's state of mind is unknown. His way of talking about historical figures as if he knew them personally is perplexing. The insider information continues when Birahima arrives in Sierra Leone and reveals the motivations of rebel leader Foday Sankoh:

[II] fait partie en 1963 du contingent de soldats sierra-léonais chargés du maintien de la paix au Congo. La façon franchement scandaleuse dont Patrice Lumumba (le premier président du Congo) a été éliminé lui donne la nausée, lui donne à réfléchir. Il en conclut que l'énorme machine de l'ONU sert l'intérêt des toubabs européens colons et colonialistes et jamais l'intérêt du pauvre nègre noir sauvage et indigène. (175)

Birahima's unique retelling of Sierra Leonean and Liberian history is colorful and interesting. It does seem as though Kourouma's own views come to the forefront at these points. While Birahima remains the ostensible narrator, there is no way he could really know about this history. Kourouma certainly has something to say about it however. The narrator's commentary about African leaders and their unhelpful interventions is particularly revealing. About Houphouët-Boigny, president of Côte-d'Ivoire, he says: "C'est un dictateur; un respectable vieillard blanchi et roussi d'abord par la corruption, ensuite par l'âge et beaucoup de sagesse" (179). He describes the jealousy between Houphouët-Boigny and Sani Abacha, president of Nigeria, whose troops made up the peacekeeping force in Sierra Leone: "C'étaient les compatriotes de Sani Abacha qui mourraient en Sierra Leone et c'était de Houphouët qu'on parlait dans les journaux internationaux ; c'était lui qui était considéré comme le sage de l'Afrique noire" (183). Upon Houphouët-Boigny's death, the leader of Togo steps into the spotlight: "On fait appel au nouveau sage de l'Afrique, au nouveau doyen d'âge des dictateurs africains, le dictateur Eyadema" (184). The intervention of these leaders and others does not help the plight of ordinary people in either Liberia or Sierra Leone: they continue to suffer as a result of the senseless conflicts. Kourouma's biting sarcasm when discussing these leaders may well come from personal experience: he was briefly imprisoned and long exiled from his native Côte d'Ivoire by Houphouët-Boigny.

Historian David Harris confirms that there were many problems with the African response to the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone. He notes:

The support of Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso [for Charles Taylor], is entangled in Francophone-Anglophone and personal relations. The language divide is most in evidence when considering the almost entirely Anglophone and mainly

Nigerian make-up of the ECOMOG intervention force that kept the NPFL out of Monrovia. Resistance to Anglophone and Nigerian dominance added to the effect of the familial relations that the Ivoirian president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, had with Tolbert, who was killed by Doe in 1980. (144)

Houphouët-Boigny and the other leaders clearly had their own reasons for interfering (or not interfering) in the conflicts of their neighbors.

Of course, while a historian attempting to give an even-handed account of the civil wars in these countries must speak in a measured way, Kourouma (through Birahima) has the freedom to emphasize the angle that seems important to him. The truth of fiction is not subjected to any rules. His versions of the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone are insightful, amusing, and completely incomprehensible. How do people behave in such a way? Kourouma is certainly not offering any easy answers. One of the points that becomes clear through the narration is that, as in *L'Aîné des orphelins*, the conflicts are not about ethnicity, but power. Birahima explains:

Quand on dit qu'il y a guerre tribale dans un pays, ça signifie que des bandits de grand chemin se sont partagé le pays. Ils se sont partagé la richesse ; ils se sont partagé le territoire ; ils se sont partagé les hommes. Ils se sont partagé tout et tout et le monde entier les laisse faire. Tout le monde les laisse tuer librement les innocents, les enfants et les femmes. (53)

Birahima contends that the leaders of clashing factions are simply “des bandits” who are looking for riches and power. Tribal loyalties are no more than a façade and this is confirmed when a group of child-soldiers switches from one rebel camp to another: “Nous étions de différentes ethnies et nous savions que chez ULIMO il fallait être krahn ou guéré. Il n'y a que les Krahns et les Guérés qui étaient acceptés par ULIMO. Chacun a pris un nom krahn” (91). The ease with

which the characters assume the dominant ethnicity in any given situation shows that ethnicity is not a real factor in the war. Rebel leaders are just looking for excuses to plunder and seize.

Anyinefa confirms, “Loin d’être exclusivement des antagonismes ‘tribaux’ (schéma qui sert d’habitude à expliquer les crises politiques en Afrique), ces guerres avaient pour principal but le contrôle des ressources économiques, naturelles et humaines des États (ou portions d’États) au profit des chefs de guerre” (87). Ordinary people suffer enormously while politicians and rebel leaders get rich at their expense. When fleeing for their lives, people leave cultural practices at the wayside. As Birahima notes: “C’est comme ça dans les guerres tribales : les gens abandonnent les villages où vivent les hommes pour se réfugier dans la forêt où vivent les bêtes sauvages” (96). Passing one’s cultural heritage on to one’s children is hardly possible under such circumstances.

Birahima’s account of his experiences in war-torn Liberia and Sierra Leone highlights the devastation the conflicts have on the young. They struggle to survive, either by joining the ranks of the combatants as child-soldiers or by fleeing their homes and living on the run. In both scenarios traditional culture is abandoned and education (both traditional and western) comes to a screeching halt. Birahima expresses a longing for his culture through the integration of proverbs and other cultural elements into his narration, but he is unable to accept his place of submission as a youngster before elders and so misses out on a large part of his culture. His version of the history of these conflicts emphasizes the fault of both African leaders and the international community. The act of writing his account of all this and integrating the orality of his culture as much as possible is cathartic for Birahima. He has shared his story and placed the blame where it ought to be and now he can move on with his life. As the story closes, Birahima is in the back of a 4 x 4, driving out of the conflict zone in the company of his aunt’s son.

Although his aunt is dead, there is hope that under the protection of his cousin, a successful doctor, Birahima's life will take a better turn.

The final novel to examine in this chapter, *Johnny Chien Méchant* by Emmanuel Dongala, has many similarities to *Allah n'est pas obligé*. It takes place in an unnamed central African country undergoing civil war as rivaling rebel groups violently contest elections and seek to impose their own candidates. To tell this story from a grassroots angle, Dongala uses a narrative voice that switches between two adolescents. Sixteen-year-old Johnny, a militant terrorizing the population, and sixteen-year-old Laokolé, a school girl fleeing the chaos with her handicapped mother and young brother, recount the same events from very different perspectives and with very different voices in alternating chapters. The two narrators cross paths a few times in the novel and finally confront each other head-on in the last two chapters.

Johnny, who eventually fixes on the nickname "Chien Méchant", speaks with an infuriating ignorance. His education is clearly lacking and his brain has surely been affected by the drugs and alcohol he abuses throughout the novel. He is extremely unsympathetic as he kills, rapes, and torments innocent civilians, leaving a path of destruction in his wake. The only comic relief in the novel comes from his ignorance and specious reasoning. He calls himself an "intellectuel", having reached CM1 (fourth grade) in school. He even asks a victim, "Quelle est l'aire d'un triangle?" (337), then demonstrates his own ignorance:

Mais, pour tout vous dire, à peine la question avait-elle franchi le seuil de mes lèvres que j'ai paniqué car, tout d'un coup, je ne me souvenais plus de la réponse. Vous savez, des situations pareilles arrivent souvent aux gens très intelligents comme nous. Notre cerveau fonctionne tellement vite et par conséquent traite tellement d'opérations par seconde que parfois les circuits deviennent si

encombrés qu'aucune information ne peut plus passer pour arriver au siège de notre mémoire, tout comme aucune voiture ne peut circuler lors d'un embouteillage sur une autoroute. (338)

Johnny is repulsive and unlovable, but in the end he is a victim, recruited and controlled by others who use him for their own gains. His youth, combined with his lack of education and cultural knowledge make him easy to manipulate. Through his narration, in stark contrast to Faustin and Birahima, he never once mentions or even alludes to any member of his family. He is alone, other than his girlfriend, Lovelita, and his fellow child soldiers Caïman, Petit Piment, Piston, Mâle Lourd, Giap, etc. By the end of the novel, most of these characters, whose real names are never mentioned, are dead or have turned against him. As Chien Méchant, he lives in a strange reality where there are no rules, no past, and no future. Unlike Faustin and Birahima, Johnny makes no mention of any African proverbs or cultural knowledge whatsoever. There is little in his narration other than the setting or place names that would indicate to the reader that he is African. He is truly cut off from his roots.

The second narrator, Laokolé, is quite different. While she is the same age as Johnny, she is clearly more cultured, more educated, and more mature. She describes the same horrific events, but she is not the one causing them. Her voice is often reflective and even lyrical. She wonders, "Est-ce à dire que le mal laissait plus de traces dans nos mémoires que le bien?" (201) and observes, "Si le bonheur est collectif, la souffrance est individuelle" (425). She is a high school student who dreams of becoming an engineer, but her studies are interrupted by the turmoil. Family is of utmost importance to her, but she loses each member. Her father is killed and her mother crippled in the first wave of violence (before the novel begins). When the second wave of violence descends she struggles desperately to save her mother and brother, but

ultimately fails. Despite her heartbreak, Lao does not give up on family. After a flight into the forest, she returns to the city in the hopes of burying her mother and rescues a little orphan girl whom she adopts as her own.

Lao, like Johnny, grew up in the city and is estranged from ancestral practices and knowledge. She is afraid of the dense dark forest, which she enters for the first time with a group fleeing the carnage of the city. She explains, “Dix minutes avant de me joindre à son groupe je ne savais pas que ma fuite allait me conduire dans cette forêt dont nous, enfants des villes, méprisions tout ce qui y était associé” (359). She gains an appreciation for the vast forest as the guide patiently shows her its wonders, but she never feels at ease in it and drops out of the trek at the first village they come to. The others try to persuade her to keep going, until a frustrated woman exclaims, “Laissez-la, les enfants d’aujourd’hui, surtout ceux qui sont nés en ville, n’écotent plus les aînés” (367). The deracination of children raised in the city becomes apparent when the militants want to distinguish between the different ethnicities. A woman laments:

Comme ils ne pouvaient pas deviner au coup d’œil qui était qui puisque nous étions tous noirs, nous avions tous deux bras et deux jambes, deux yeux et deux oreilles, ils ont inventé le test de la langue : celui qui ne savait pas parler la langue de la tribu était automatiquement abattu, comme si dans notre monde moderne tous les enfants parlaient encore la langue tribale. (308)

Lao is one of these modern city children, but, because of the care her parents took to teach her, she does retain some traditional knowledge. She knows about various medicinal plants, explaining, “Je connaissais ces plantes car [ma mère] me les avait enseignées. Elle m’en avait fait aussi connaître beaucoup d’autres car, me disait-elle, les filles préservait mieux que les

garçons le savoir d'une mère, surtout un savoir traditionnel venu des anciens" (219). Her father taught her about his work as a mason, but also some oral literature. In a refugee camp, she begins to teach one of these pieces to the many aimless children:

Une récitation que mon grand-père, puis mon père et puis moi, avions tous apprise quand nous étions enfants. Et maintenant à mon tour je la transmettais à une nouvelle génération. Cela m'a donné une satisfaction intellectuelle et tout d'un coup j'ai repris espoir dans l'avenir pour la première fois depuis le début de cette stupide guerre : si ces enfants renaient cette récitation, ils la passeraient à leur tour à leurs enfants ; ainsi la chaîne de la vie continuerait, tout ne serait pas perdu. Depuis l'aube de l'humanité, c'était ainsi que se transmettait la connaissance, à travers les enfants puis par les enfants de leurs enfants. (427)

Lao understands the importance of a traditional education, and she understands the importance of ancestral language too. When, at the end, she adopts the orphan child, she decides on a name for the little girl: "J'ai plongé ma mémoire dans le riche patrimoine de la langue de mon grand-père et j'en suis revenue avec le mot le plus pur de la tribu, le mot le plus beau reflétant parfaitement ce moment : *Kiessé ! La joie !*" (457).

Lao is very different from Johnny because, despite the tragedy that befalls her, she retains her identity and takes pride in her language and cultural heritage. Johnny has lost his identity right down to his name which he changes several times throughout the novel. Nonetheless he does use ethnicity to justify his pillaging and killing: The Dogo-Mayi are attacking the Mayi-Dogo because the former have been supposedly oppressed by the latter and their president. However, ethnicity is more of an excuse than a real motivation as the Mayi-Dogo in their neighborhood are just as poor as the Dogo-Mayi, the rebels pillage shops indiscriminately from

all ethnicities to take what they want, and Johnny's girlfriend Lovelita is Mayi-Dogo, the supposed archenemy. No information is given about these ethnicities to differentiate one from the other. Lao's family, whose ethnicity is not identified, is attacked in both waves of violence: first when the Mayi-Dogo seize power and later when the Dogo-Mayi take over. Because Johnny does not actually know anything about his ethnicity he is easily manipulated, impressed by a professor who comes to speak to the boys in his quarter:

De toute façon j'étais moi-même déjà un peu un intellectuel et si dans ce quartier quelqu'un pouvait comprendre ce que racontait ce confrère c'était moi. J'avais atteint le CM1 tout de même ! Alors mon intelligence a tout de suite rencontré l'intelligence de ce docteur en quelque chose et j'ai compris qu'en réalité les Mayi-Dogos étaient nos ennemis séculaires et qu'il fallait les tuer. (134)

While he had resisted earlier efforts by the rebels to recruit him, Johnny accepts the words of this "intellectual" without question and joins the militia.

Dongala directly addresses this question of ethnicity in the novel when Lao and her mother watch the television news at their friend Tamila's house following a day of violence. The program interviews two experts about the situation: a European researcher and an African political scientist. When the European insists that the conflict is not based on ethnicity, the spectators at Tamila's house immediately protest, citing examples of the ethnic war they experienced that day. Tamila sums up: "Moi je dis que, manipulées ou pas, ce sont deux ethnies ou deux tribus qui s'entretuent" (309). Then the African expert comes on and says that at its core, the conflict is based on ethnicity. At this, the spectators protest again with more examples proving the opposite. Tamila concludes, "Ce ne sont pas les tribus qui s'entretuent, ce sont les politiciens qui nous tuent" (311). This rejection of "experts," whether European or African,

shows that the causes of the conflict are extremely complex and cannot be explained through simple statements.

As for Johnny and his gang, their real motivations are different yet. Johnny urges his comrades to take what they want as they progress through the city, and then notes:

Je ne sais pas pourquoi je racontais cela à une bande de gens qui n'avaient rien à apprendre dans l'art de piller puisqu'ils l'avaient fait déjà mille fois et puisque c'était la raison majeure pour laquelle nous combattions. Pour nous enrichir. Pour faire ramper un adulte. Pour avoir toutes les nanas qu'on voulait. Pour la puissance que donnait un fusil. Pour être maître du monde. Ouais, tout ça à la fois. Mais nos chefs et notre président nous ont ordonné de ne pas dire cela. Ils nous ont enjoint de dire à ceux qui nous poseraient des questions que nous combattions pour la liberté et la démocratie et cela pour nous attirer les sympathies du monde extérieur. (101-2)

Johnny and those around him behave in a way that is reminiscent of *Lord of the Flies* as they think only of themselves and their immediate gratification and revel in the thrill of power over others. They are young, uneducated, and seem to have no cultural or familial ties. The biggest difference between Laokolé and the child soldiers is the education – both traditional and modern – which Lao has received while the soldiers have not. Anyinefa notes that while the postcolonial state has certainly failed these children, the problem goes beyond that:

Mais la crise est aussi sociale : il semble qu'il n'existe aucune institution qui puisse garantir à ces enfants, qu'ils soient villageois ou citadins, une vie décente. S'il est clair que l'État postcolonial a failli, les anciennes structures sociales, telles que la famille, ont fait de même (89-90).

Johnny, like Birahima, seems to yearn for an education and demonstrates this by his unusual penchant for collecting books from the houses he pillages. Anyinefa notes: “Ce fétichisme pour les dictionnaires ou les livres chez Johnny et Birahima est bien une compensation pour leur manque d’éducation solide et l’expression sublimée de leur rêve d’y accéder” (94). These boys certainly do feel the void of a lack of a Western education which would have given them access to mainstream society.

Johnny also seeks to fill the void of cultural connection. In the novel, he expresses interest in brand-name European clothing (he was once a member of the “Société des Ambianceurs”), American action movies (he mentions Schwarzenegger, Chuck Norris, and Rambo), and hip-hop music (Tupak Shakur). Many of the Western cultural imports that Johnny embraces are rooted in rebellion and violence and may be partly to blame for the ease with which he adopts a violent lifestyle. But more importantly, his obsession with Western culture signals a rejection of local values (Anyinefa 96). Johnny has no desire to listen to his elders and his act of expressing himself through Western clothing, movies, and music makes this clear.

In a way even more extreme than what we find in Faustin and Birahima, a traditional education passed on through traditional structures such as family and local community, and a modern education received through formal schooling are both sadly lacking in Johnny. His understanding and identity come from other sources. Anyinefa notes: “En Afrique (comme ailleurs), la culture populaire, beaucoup plus que les écoles, semble constituer désormais le site pédagogique principal des adolescents” (96). It is no wonder that Johnny is the least sympathetic of all the child-narrators we have examined.

We have seen that Laokolé is quite different in terms of the education she receives and this enables her to behave in a very different way. By Western standards she is still a child at

sixteen, but the events of her life mature her and she takes on the responsibilities of a woman. Forced to mother her own mother as she pushes her around in a wheelbarrow and later choosing to mother children at the refugee camp, Lao's voice takes on depth and compassion in stark contrast with Johnny's immature rants. She is instrumental in helping other women find their voice as she suggests that a Western journalist interview a woman she met in the camp. This woman tells her story of rape and opens a floodgate as other women speak up:

Elles semblaient libérées par ce que venait de dire Lea, elles semblaient découvrir que la vraie honte était de continuer à taire ce qu'elles avaient subi et que leur libération commençait par une prise de la parole. Si réticentes à étaler leurs humiliations à la face du monde un instant auparavant, elles voulaient toutes parler maintenant. (436)

Lao helps these women tell their stories and she proves that her voice, broken as it may be, is stronger than Johnny's brutish self-centered one.

At the end of the novel, the confrontation between Johnny and Lao takes place at last. Johnny kidnaps Lao along with the orphan child she tried to protect from his brutality. When she finds herself in his power, she uses her wits to save herself and the child. She knows what she must do: "Il fallait à tout prix que je lui tiensse tête, que je garde mon avantage psychologique car je savais maintenant que tant que je ne lui laisserais pas l'occasion d'utiliser son arme, il serait à ma portée" (454). In an unexpected turn of events, the power shifts from Johnny to Lao as she unnerves him with her words. Despite the fact that he is the one with a gun, he becomes afraid of her, thinking, "Dans mon pays, il faut se méfier des femmes. Il y en avait qu'on appelait des *mamiwatas*, qui vivaient dans des cours d'eau et venaient marabouter les hommes par leur beauté et leur sensualité" (448). In an attempt to impress her with his intellect, Johnny hands Lao a

large Bible he pillaged from one of the homes and she throws it suddenly at his face, knocking him back. The back of his neck hits the corner of a table on his way down and Lao, taking advantage of this opportunity, prevents him from reaching for his gun and stomps on his genitals until he dies.

In *Johnny Chien Méchant*, Dongala uses the voices of two adolescents to express the importance of understanding one's culture, of having roots. Because of her knowledge of her ancestors and her love for her family, Lao is able to hope for and imagine a better future. She may not know where her next meal will come from, but she is free and full of joy as the novel ends. Johnny, on the other hand, has no future, and never did, even when alive. He cared nothing for his culture or heritage and it showed in the way he lived. His violent and careless lifestyle was not sustainable and his death inevitable.

In these three novels narrated by children, the authors focus not on the big picture, but on one or two lives. The readers view history through the limited perspective of a child, and yet see much. History is about more than dates and statistics and these children's tragic lives serve to reveal the challenges that Africa continues to face. The truths reflected in these novels address the aftermath of genocide and civil war and the almost impossible task of putting a society back together following such an event. The authors' use of child narrators keeps the focus not on the past, but on the future of Africa. Because of their age and experiences, the children are unreliable narrators with voluntary and involuntary gaps in their memories. Nevertheless, their voices are very powerful. Running through all three novels is a profound sense of loss. Loss of culture, loss of past, and loss of future are all linked. The novels are bleak, reflecting the children's dire circumstances. As the reader observes their alienation and struggle to find a place in society, s/he fears for the future of their countries.

While the novels serve as laments for the loss of African culture and traditional society, each one also indicates a way forward. In *L'Aîné des orphelins* Monénembo emphasizes the proverbs and traditional wisdom passed on from one generation to the next as a powerful way to connect to the past. Faustin holds on to his memories of family through these proverbs and at the end when he at last accesses his memories of the slaughter in the church, he seems liberated, despite being about to die. Similarly, remembering is key in *Allah n'est pas obligé*. Birahima not only remembers the gruesome details of the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, but writes them all down for others to read as well. In *Johnny Chien Méchant*, Laokolé bears witness to the horrible events that take place while drawing courage from memories of her family. Recording the tragedy of what happened in each case without glossing over the bad while rooting the future in culture and traditions constitutes the way forward. Remembering the past, whether recent or ancient, seems to be key in constructing a hopeful future in all three novels.

5. EXPOSING THE TRUTH: INTERPRETING PLURAL VOICES

The different voices highlighted in each of the previous chapters add nuance to the idea of an African perspective found in Francophone literature. The griot's voice in *Le Maître de la parole*, *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue*, and *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba* emphasizes the importance of Africa's rich traditions and orality, while the woman's voice as expressed in *Une Si Longue Lettre* and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* points out the cruelty of that tradition towards those who hold little power in society. The child's voice found in *L'Aîné des orphelins*, *Allah n'est pas obligé*, and *Johnny Chien Méchant* reinforces the need for a connection to the past when looking forward. In this final chapter the various voices come together in two novels by Ahmadou Kourouma in which he uses a plurality of narrators to tell the stories. His innovative techniques allow him to incorporate African orality into the language and content of the novels, while the different narrators allow the reader to see different points of view on African history, leading to a broader understanding of an African perspective.

With the appearance of his first novel, *Les Soleils des indépendances* in 1968, Kourouma expressed his profound disillusionment with the leaders of the new era of independence and became known for his adaptation of the French language to African traditions. In 1990, his second novel appeared: *Monnè, outrages et défis*. This novel, which retraces a century of African history from colonization through independence, solidified Kourouma's position among the great authors of Francophone Africa.

Les Soleils tells the story of Fama Doumbouya, prince of a rural community. When the novel begins, Fama is living far away from his ancestral lands in the capital of a fictional West African country shortly after its independence from France. Fama lives in miserable conditions; formerly noble, he is reduced to wandering the streets looking for funeral ceremonies where he might be given a share of the offerings because of his family name. His wife Salimata works constantly to support the couple selling porridge and rice in the bustling city center. Of all their misfortunes, the most painful is the fact that they are childless. Fama and Salimata live in a world turned upside down by colonialism and then independence and Fama especially seems incapable of adapting.

The situation in *Monnè* is equally dismal. The novel begins in the pre-colonial era with our protagonist, the young king Djigui Keita, as ruler of the fictional kingdom of Soba. Faced with the growing menace of French colonial domination, Djigui joins forces with Samory Touré, a historical figure who would stop at nothing to avoid conquest by the infidel “Nazaréens”. But, when Samory insists on a mass exodus, burning everything that will be left behind, Djigui refuses. He cannot destroy his city because of a prophesy that assures the continuation of his dynasty only as long as the city stands. Djigui and the people of Soba stay and one day are surprised by the arrival of a French column. Thanks to an interpreter’s inaccurate translations, the French believe that they are received in peace, set up headquarters on a hill overlooking the town, and begin to dominate Djigui and his kingdom. The ordinary citizens of Soba suffer the most from the forced labor, required services, taxes, and wars, but Djigui himself is humiliated and every year he suffers more and more *monnè* : a Malinké word that means “outrages, défis, mépris, injures, humiliations, colère rageuse”, unable to resist. Like Fama, Djigui watches the upheaval of his world and the drastic decreasing of his power.

Like the other authors in this study, Kourouma uses French, a colonial language, to write his novels. He explained in an interview with Bernard Magnier that writing a novel completely in Malinké was never a possibility for him, “Je ne l’écris pas bien, mon malinké n’est pas assez développé. Un roman en malinké n’aura pas assez de lecteurs. Très peu de Malinkés lisent actuellement leur langue” (12). However, in *Les Soleils des indépendances* Kourouma greatly modifies the language to make it accommodate African oral traditions and to make it more like his native Malinké; he twists the syntax, mixes verbal tenses, invents words, and creates unusual phrases. In addition, the narration is filled with oral elements such as repetition, interjections, images and metaphors rich in local color, proverbs, and folk stories. Madeleine Borgomano explains Kourouma’s technique:

Kourouma prend, dans son livre, une option très radicale et assez provocante : il tente la gageure d’écrire, en français, un roman africain et même *malinké*, en limitant au maximum les traductions, les explications et les concessions. Il cherche à s’approprier la langue française elle-même en la *malinkisant* [...] Il obtient alors un effet de surprise et de dépaysement qui peut choquer, mais qui n’est sûrement pas étranger à son succès. (16)

However, Kourouma doesn’t write in this way just for the shock value. The narrative technique is key to the goal of his novel. He explains in an interview with Jean Ouédraogo, “mon objectif est d’être authentique dans le sens africain [...] J’emprunte la technique du griot [...] je conte dans le sens des Malinkés, mais je peux dire que c’est la cosmogonie africaine, que c’est le langage africain” (774). Kourouma manipulates the French language to make it more apt to expressing his African point of view.

One of Kourouma's techniques is a sort of direct translation from the Malinké language and culture into French. Through his writing, the author of *Les Soleils* seeks to reduce the distance between the "African soul" and the "straitjacket" of the rigid French language (Miller 192). Kourouma keeps the original language and culture in the forefront with a transparent translation that maintains many elements of Malinké such as its syntax, expressions, and cultural references. Kourouma explains:

Pour *Les Soleils des indépendances*, je pensais en malinké et le problème était de retraduire, de transmettre la démarche intellectuelle qui était faite en malinké. Chaque mot a des connotations dans une langue. Comment le traduire sans ou avec ces connotations ? C'est chaque fois un problème [...] il arrive que je conçoive certaines choses en français mais dans ce cas je place un Malinké dans cette situation et j'essaye d'imaginer sa façon de percevoir [...] Dans les parties dialoguées le français de France ne pouvait pas convenir. (12)

Translating between languages concerns more than just words. To capture the essence of his characters, Kourouma must think in Malinké while writing in French.

Kwaku A. Gyasi notes that even the title of the novel demonstrates the direct translation that Kourouma uses (156). Neither "soleil" nor "indépendance" are normally plural in French and the phrase "les soleils des indépendances" is not immediately comprehensible to the uninitiated. But the title becomes clear in the first chapter as the narrator talks of, "l'ère des Indépendances (les soleils des Indépendances, disent les Malinkés)" (*Soleils* 7-8). The narrator's intervention reveals that the title is the direct translation of a Malinké expression.

The unusual syntax present throughout the novel is another indicator of Kourouma's translation from Malinké. Fernando Lambert explains that Kourouma "violente au besoin" the

French language, disregarding the conventions of standard French in order to preserve a Malinké style of expression (293). The strange syntax is particularly remarkable in proverbs and proverb-like sentences. For example, Kourouma writes, “C’était les immenses déchéance et honte, aussi grosses que la vieille panthère surprise disputant des charognes aux hyènes, que de connaître Fama courir ainsi pour des funérailles” (10) and, “Car dans quelle réunion le molosse s’est-il séparé de sa déhontée façon de s’asseoir ?...” (17). Another example: “A vouloir tout mener au galop, on enterre les vivants, et la rapidité de la langue nous jette dans de mauvais pas d’où l’agilité des pieds ne peut nous tirer” (20). The word order in these sentences is far from standard. Adjectives precede nouns and subordinate clauses follow one after the other, creating very long and complicated sentences. This style of writing obliges the reader to slow down and reread the sentences carefully in order to understand the meaning. The proverb, which represents African wisdom, requires a translation that transforms it as little as possible. French serves only as a vehicle to communicate a different language and culture. The interferences of Malinké in the French text, according to Borgomano, “produisent des constructions qui, sans être agrammaticales, et sans jamais devenir incompréhensibles, déroutent et surprennent” (41).

While the Western reader may find him or herself in unfamiliar territory, kept off balance by the surprising turn of phrases, the African reader can relate to the phrasing and enjoy reading French that is written in the way an African might speak. Gyasi concludes, “Kourouma manages to achieve a rupture or severance with the French rhythm in order to restore the African rhythm” (156). Maintaining the syntax of the original language, especially in the proverbs, helps create a sense of orality in the work. It is a reaction against both the prescriptivism of the Académie Française and against French historical narrative.

Yet another indicator of the translation from spoken Malinké to written French is the author's use of unexpected verb tenses. Makhily Gassama notes a confusion, even an abusive use, of tenses in *Les Soleils* (41). First, the pluperfect appears in several passages where the definite past would be more appropriate:

Elle n'en pouvait plus, elle **s'était arrêtée**, quelque temps seulement, car aussitôt la brousse **s'était ébranlée**. (*Soleils* 46)

Il **avait mordu**, **avait secoué** et **vidé** ses sacs les plus secrets, **avait interpellé** et **interpellé** les invisibles pour leur arracher la fécondité de Salimata. (*Soleils* 68)

Chaque harmattan, Balla **avait accumulé** exploits sur exploits comme un cultivateur aligne des buttes. (*Soleils* 127)

The context of these passages does not seem to justify the pluperfect which, necessarily, marks something that happened prior to something else that also happened in the past. Since these passages are not linked to prior incidents, the tense chosen creates much confusion and indicates another way of thinking.

Temporal problems continue with other verb tenses. To cite only a few examples, we see the imperfect used in place of the present: "Même s'il nuitait dans les cieux, parlait au génie comme à un copain, un homme **restait** un enfant" (*Soleils* 67). And later, the imperfect used in place of the definite past: "Les fétiches de Balla rengainés, entrés et enfermés, le soleil **réussissait** à se libérer, alors qu'il était au sommet du manguier du cimetière. D'un coup il **éclatait**" (*Soleils* 125). The confusion continues with the past and present subjunctive used in unexpected contexts. These changes reflect spoken Malinké which does not contain the same tenses or distinguish between tenses in the same way as French. Often, speakers do not use different tenses to indicate past, present, and future. Rather, other words in the sentence function

as markers to indicate the relative placement of events in time. The confusion created by the unconventional use of verb tenses in *Les Soleils* indicates a different way of thinking and contributes to the authentic African perspective Kourouma seeks to represent in his writing.

Even in the story itself, Kourouma mixes past, present, and future, frequently jumping back and forth in time. The story opens on the seventh day after the death of a certain Malinké named Ibrahima Koné. But after the first sentence an analepsis takes us back to describe the movements of Ibrahima Koné's shadow immediately following his death. The shadow travels to his native village to put his affairs in order and then returns to the capital to rejoin his body. As the story once again approaches the seventh day, the narrator jumps forward with a prolepsis:

Des jours suivirent le jour des obsèques jusqu'au septième jour et les funérailles du septième jour se déroulèrent devant l'ombre, puis se succédèrent des semaines et arriva le quarantième jour, et les funérailles du quarantième jour ont été fêtées au pied de l'ombre accroupie, toujours invisible pour le Malinké commun. Puis l'ombre est repartie définitivement. Elle a marché jusqu'au terroir malinké où elle ferait le bonheur d'une mère en se réincarnant dans un bébé malinké (*Soleils* 8).

After this paragraph which describes the future in the past tense, the story returns to the seventh day following the death of Ibrahima Koné and the ceremony that is taking place. This opening to the novel is disorienting, but serves an important purpose. Borgomano explains that it represents “une conception du temps souple et différente de la conception occidentale, où passé, présent et avenir s'entremêlent sans se distinguer nettement (de même que la vie et la mort s'entremêlent sans distinction nette)” (26). This conception of the world, where time boundaries are unclear, is

important to understanding the African point of view. In Africa, time is often thought of as fluid and cyclical, and for this reason Kourouma introduces it as such from the start of his novel.

The vocabulary of the novel is also unique. While one might expect to find an abundance of words in Malinké, they are in fact only rarely used. Gyasi notes that Kourouma uses Malinké words only when referring to metaphysical or abstract concepts that are especially difficult to translate into French (156). For example, “La colonisation, les maladies, les famines, même les Indépendances ne tombent que ceux qui ont leur ni (l’âme) et leur dja (le double) vidés et affaiblis par les ruptures d’interdit et de totem” (*Soleils* 116). Here, the French equivalent is given in parentheses, but it is understood that the words are so culturally specific that they defy an accurate translation. In other instances the words are explained in the text. For example, the narrator says that for each individual there is an object that can end his or her life: “cet objet met fin à notre destin : c’est notre kala” (130). And later, “Une danse, un n’goni de chasseurs sans sang, disons-le, c’était décevant” (149). The insertion of these Malinké words is necessary when referring to particular aspects of the Malinké culture that are specific to it. In these cases, other languages lack an exact equivalent.

In addition to these rare words inserted directly from Malinké, Kourouma sometimes invents his own words. Here is an example in a sentence that we already examined for its unusual syntax: “Car dans quelle réunion le molosse s’est-il séparé de sa déhontée façon de s’asseoir ?...” (*Soleils* 17). The word “déhonté”, according to Borgomano, is an invented word that derives from “éhonté”, meaning brazen or shameless (19). The word is understandable to French speakers without being familiar and contributes to the sense of estrangement that Kourouma creates for the Western reader. In other instances the author uses French words in unusual ways: “Et arrivait l’heure de la troisième prière ; troisième prière de ce jour que Fama

devait courber sur la tombe” (*Soleils* 117). Only in the language of Ahmadou Kourouma could one “courber une prière”. Another technique is to use verbs as adjectives: “Les tombes des non retournées et non pleurées parce que considérées comme des sacrifices pour le bonheur du village” (*Soleils* 35); “Les deux plus viandés et gras morceaux des Indépendances sont sûrement le secrétaire général et la direction d’une coopérative...” (23); “un vidé comme Fama” (29) and “une nuit africaine non bâtarisée” (97). These neologisms allow Kourouma to express himself in a manner that more closely resembles Malinké.

Other features of Kourouma’s vocabulary throughout the novel include many words from African French and from Islam as well as names of African peoples and places. But perhaps more important than the specific words is the style of writing that Kourouma employs – a narrative style that evokes his culture’s orality. This effect of an oral style is produced through the use of specific literary devices: apostrophe, repetition, interrogative syntax, use of first person pronouns, and others. These devices help make the narrator into a griot who is recounting a story to a live audience. Gyasi puts it like this: “Kourouma’s novel reveals many aspects of the engaging artistry of the griot – master storyteller, trustee of the lore, the genealogy, and the wisdom of traditional African societies. And it is by virtue of its flawlessly oral quality that here, more than in any other African novel written in a European language, the reader encounters the shape and sound of oral performance” (154). While these are in fact literary devices, they allow Kourouma’s narrator to seemingly mimic the call and response of an oral story with hesitations and interjections throughout. In fact, the narrator seems to be speaking directly to the reader in these passages: “Vous paraissez sceptique ! Eh bien, moi, je vous le jure, et j’ajoute...” (*Soleils* 7), “Donc c’est possible, d’ailleurs sûr, ...” (8) “les boubous blancs, bleus, verts, jaunes, disons de toutes les couleurs” (11), “Que voulez-vous” (11), “Dites-moi, en bon Malinké que

pouvait-il chercher encore ?” (13), “Qui n’est pas Malinké peut l’ignorer” (12), “Une vie de bâtardise pour quelques mois de repos, disons que c’est un peu court !” (24), “Vous les connaissez bien” (116), “Empressons-nous de le conter” (127), “Disons-le, parce qu’Allah aime le vrai” (134), “Maintenant, dites-le moi ! ... vraiment dites-le moi, cela était-il vraiment, vraiment nécessaire ? Non et non !” (151), “Ajoutons” (153). With these interjections the reader finds a place in the story. As Gyasi notes, Kourouma succeeds in transforming the isolated reader into a sympathetic audience, closely connected to the narrator. In addition, the frequent use of the first person plural allows the narrator to draw attention to himself while at the same time drawing in his readers, exhorting them to listen carefully (155). While the non-African reader likely feels disoriented by the Malinké-infused French, he or she also sympathizes with the narrator who seeks to explain and clarify as the action unfolds. The novel becomes like an oral story as the narrator repeatedly addresses the reader.

Commentary and explanations in parentheses further add to the illusion of an oral story. Often, the narrator suspends the action to provide some information or to make a sarcastic remark: “(et Allah seul peut compter le nombre de vieux marchands ruinés par les Indépendances dans la capitale !)” (*Soleils* 9), “(le parti unique, le savez-vous ? ressemble à une société de sorcières, les grandes invitées dévorent les enfants des autres)” (23), “(de toute façon depuis l’indépendance il n’y avait plus ni routes ni essence)” (86), “(nous viderons dans la suite le sac de ce vieux fauve...)” (108) and “(Fama allait le constater dans la suite)” (196). These parenthetical comments give readers the impression that they are present with the narrator who is privileging them with supplemental information. Once again the link between narrator and reader is reinforced, simulating the physical co-presence of a griot and an audience.

Yet another technique that Kourouma borrows from orality is the liberal use of questions directed towards the audience. Sometimes the narrator provides an answer, and sometimes the questions are rhetorical. These questions engage the reader in the story and contribute another layer of orality to the novel. Here are just a few examples: “Alors pourquoi attendre sur un trottoir un damné ?” (19), “Que n’a-t-il pas fait pour être coopté ?” (23), “Mais alors, qu’apportèrent les Indépendances à Fama ?” (23), “Et qui savait si ce malheur n’en annonçait pas un plus grand ?” (64), “mais pour qui le faisaient-ils et pourquoi ?” (163). Sometimes the questions appear to be the narrator’s observations: “Où a-t-on vu l’hyène désertier les environs des cimetières et le vautour l’arrière des cases ?” (17), “D’ailleurs faisons bien le tour des choses : Fama pouvait-il prétendre avoir eu raison sur tous les bords ?” (20); sometimes the interior thoughts of Fama or Salimata: “Qu’est-ce qui primait dans la volonté d’Allah ? Fidélité ou maternité ?” (43), “Le matin était-il loin encore ?” (98), “Un aveugle, que pouvait-il y voir ? Rien” (118); and sometimes posed directly to the reader: “faut-il le mentionner ?” (135), “Avez-vous déjà couché sur un tara ?” (158). In yet other instances it is difficult to attribute the question to any particular voice; often the narrator’s voice mingles with the voices of the characters in the story. Kourouma seems to enjoy creating ambiguity, once again decentering his readers. What is clear is that the author constructed *Les Soleils* in a deliberate style which integrates the rhythm, exclamations, and narrative sources of the African oral tradition.

There is, as I said earlier, a plurality of voices in the novel. Rosemary Schikora remarks, “the point of view indicated by textual voice qualities – the inflections, the intonations, the idiom – is at once that of a distinct narrative *je*, Fama, Salimata, *and* the social group to which they belong” (813). Let’s examine the different voices closely. First there is the narrator “*je*” who is outside of the story and who addresses the reader as “*vous*”: “Vous paraissez sceptique ! Eh bien,

moi, je vous le jure, et j'ajoute..." (*Soleils* 7). This voice represents the largest sphere, being exterior to the story. Then there is another narrative voice that intervenes in the story, addressing Fama as "tu", often in order to give him some advice: "Fama, tu dois penser, considérer, avant d'épouser Mariam" (95), "Ignorant comme tu étais des vieilles choses et aussi aveugle et sourd dans le monde invisible des mânes et des génies que Balla l'était dans notre monde, tu te devais d'écouter le vieux féticheur" (152). But immediately following this line, the narrator changes perspective and refers to his character with the pronoun "il": "Fama voulait partir, il partirait" (152). Schikora proposes that this alternating between "tu" and "il", this voice sometimes directed inwardly and sometimes outwardly, mimics the presence of a participating audience. It also produces a variable relationship between Fama and the narrator, and by extension, the reader. The reader experiences a close, intimate connection with Fama when the narrator uses "tu", but a more distant perspective when the narrator refers to him as "il" (Schikora 814). The changing perspective of the narration produces the effect of an oral story, told by several contributing voices. In a traditional retelling of an epic in West Africa, the primary storyteller is typically joined by "naamu-sayers" who encourage him with frequent interjections (Conrad xvii), and by singers who perform the songs interspersed throughout the epics (Hale 80). Kourouma uses a changing perspective, it seems, to imitate this aspect of oral literature.

Another aspect of the narration in *Les Soleils* is the revelation of Fama's and Salimata's interior thoughts and even the thoughts of the general public. There is not a great deal of direct dialog in the novel; the characters' thoughts and conversations are retold by the narrator, often taking on their point of view, in the *style indirect libre*. The narrator assumes Fama's point of view most frequently, but Schikora insists, "much of the work's power to sustain our interest, to entertain, amuse, and move us, derives from the contrast of antagonistic points of view,

conveyed in the most direct and unmediated fashion” (814). An incident in which Fama arrives late to a funeral ceremony and feels insulted by the griot provides a good example of this juxtaposition of contrasting points of view:

Fama hurlait et allait hurler plus fort encore, mais... Maudit griot ! maudite toux ! Une méchante et violente toux embarrassa la gorge du griot et l’obligea à se courber et cracher les poumons, et arrêta Fama dans son élan. [...] Et dans l’assemblée boubous et nattes bruissaient, on fronçait les visages et on se parlait avec de grands gestes. Toujours Fama, toujours des parts insuffisantes, toujours quelque chose ! Les gens en étaient rassasiés. Qu’on le fasse asseoir ! (13).

In this passage the point of view starts out as that of an objective narrator, but quickly slides into Fama’s perspective and way of speaking. His thoughts are communicated directly by the exclamations “Maudit griot ! maudite toux !” As the passage continues, the point of view slides again to encompass that of the other participants at the ceremony. Their thoughts and conversations are recounted in the same way by the narrator: “Qu’on le fasse asseoir !”. This technique is humorous and helps the reader to visualize the scene. The narrator varies his language to imitate the different characters and groups and to distinguish their point of view from his own. Schikora explains that Kourouma makes liberal use of “typically ‘popular’ speech habits – savory, straightforward expressions, colloquial syntax, repetitions – all punctuated with frequent exclamations” (814). Again, this reinforces the impression of a skillful griot as he imitates the discursive style of the different characters to bring the story to life.

In some passages, however, the source of the voice is not as clear. It is especially difficult to attribute passages expressing Malinké doctrines; are these passages coming from public opinion, the Malinkés perspective, or the narrator’s point of view?

La soumission de la femme, sa servitude sont les commandements d'Allah, absolument essentiels parce que se muant en force, en valeur, en grâce, en qualité pour l'enfant sortant du giron de l'épouse. Et l'enfant, si Allah l'accordait, il devrait être un homme dont les millions d'années n'effaceront jamais les empreintes sur terre. Les grands hommes sont nés des mères qui ont couvé les peines, les pleurs, les soucis et les sueurs du mariage... (44)

Il était toujours dangereux de dormir, c'est-à-dire, pour un Malinké, de libérer son âme dans ces villages de brousse, sans une petite lumière qui veille et éloigne d'autres âmes errantes, les mauvais sorts et les mauvais génies. (99)

Les Malinkés ont la duplicité parce qu'ils ont l'intérieur plus noir que leur peau et les dires plus blancs que leurs dents. (108)

Borgomano reminds us that the narrator himself is not homogenous and, "il est à peu près impossible de dégager son opinion : la doxa peut être rapportée ironiquement, ou au contraire, de l'intérieur, ou même les deux, d'une façon assez perverse" (92). While the passages clearly contain some irony, the impossibility of attributing all of the opinions in the text contributes to the impression of multiple narrators and multiple points of view.

Another important feature of orality that Kourouma transforms and exploits in the novel is repetition. The narrator often links several synonyms together in a style that keeps the action of the story moving forward despite all the doublings and accumulations: "Il fallait bousculer, menacer, injurier pour marcher" (10), "On comptait et reconnaissait/nez et oreilles/de tous les quartiers, de toutes les professions" (11), "les affronts et colères" (11), "en plein visage et très publiquement" (11), "bafoué, provoqué, injurié par qui ?" (16), "Fama souffla, tempêta, grogna" (18), "une lampe à l'huile flambait, fumait et brillait" (37), "la ville nègre s'éloignait, se

rapetissait, se fondait dans le noir des feuillages” (45), “multipliaient, modelaient et gonflaient tout ce vacarme d’essaim d’abeilles” (54), “mots terribles, brillants et sonnants” (72), “il n’avait cessé de s’agiter, de chanter et de protester” (88), “aussi dénudés, pauvres et secs que le caleçon d’un orphelin” (90), “Monde terrible, changeant, incompréhensible !” (103). In his interview with Ouédraogo, Kourouma states that repetition is used in orality to insist on what is being said and to facilitate comprehension since one cannot go back to a sentence like in a written text. That being said, there is another reason behind his use of repetition in his works. Kourouma explains:

La répétition chez moi aussi a un autre sens : cela signifie que je n’ai pas trouvé le mot exact saisissant le terme que je veux donner. Je montre pour que le lecteur se trouve un peu gêné là-dedans et se dise au fond : qu’est-ce qu’il veut dire, qu’est-ce qu’il veut ressortir ? Je lui dis : voilà je vous offre un peu tout ce que j’ai à dire là-dessus, mais je n’arrive pas, moi-même, à trouver le mot. (775)

This impossibility of reaching an exact translation between an African language and a European one comes to the forefront even more in *Monnè*, the second novel to be examined in this chapter. But even in *Les Soleils* it is clear that a perfect translation between the two languages is not attainable.

Another aspect of oral literature is the storyteller’s use of images to facilitate the visualization of events. The image in traditional stories, Gassama explains, “possède plusieurs dimensions : elle suggère, explique, éduque, réalise, participe” (68-9). Kourouma helps the reader visualize his story with an astonishing number of comparisons, metaphors, and proverbs that create images rich in local color. Gyasi explains that, “*Les Soleils* offers a multitude of metaphors and comparisons that produce a highly surprising effect in French because they are

embedded in the physical milieu and psychological context of the native speakers” (154). Thus we read that Togobala is “asséché comme la rivière Touko en plein harmattan” (*Soleils* 131), and that Fama is doubtless “stérile comme le roc, comme la poussière et l’harmattan” (77). The comparisons evoke Malinké customs: “Mes dires ont donc sonné le silence comme le pet de la vieille grand-mère dans le cercle des petits enfants respectueux” (91). This comparison refers to an entire social system: the bond between grandparents and grandchildren, respect for the elderly, the gathering of children to listen to stories told by elders, etc. Borgomano points out that these comparisons are often metonymies, coming as they do from the Malinké environment (42). Comparisons are thus drawn between Fama and “un vautour”, “un chacal”, “une hyène”. His wife refers to him as “chose usée et fatiguée comme une vieille calebasse ébréchée” (55). And the narrator notes he is, “analphabète comme la queue d’un âne” (23). As for Salimata, “Le ventre restait sec comme du granit” (27). These comparisons all come from the milieu in which the story takes place.

Animals are very often evoked in the comparisons, revealing the persistence of a traditional way of life in which animals are not separate from the world of humans. We already saw Fama compared to all sorts of scavengers. Another character “s’excitait comme un grillon affolé” (14), the exchange of insults at a gathering provokes the “brouhaha de l’arrivée d’un troupeau de buffles dans la forêt” (14). The narrator continues the animal comparisons: “Comme une nuée de sauterelles les Indépendances tombèrent sur l’Afrique” (22), “Fama avait comme le petit rat de marigot creusé le trou pour le serpent avaleur de rats” (22), “le vrai coq du chantier qui osa demander à coucher Salimata” (50), “être couvert comme un poussin sous une calebasse” (54), “Comme un boa, lui se tordit, se balançait et amorçait un sourire” (78), “Ouedrago conduisait avec une prudence de caméléon” (84), “Près de vingt ans de vie commune avaient amené Fama

et Salimata à se connaître comme la petite carpe et le crocodile cohabitant dans le même bief” (94), “elle était moqueuse comme une mouche et, disait-on, féconde comme une souris” (158), “Les deux coépouses comme deux poules s’assailirent” (158), “Tout cela était aussi clair que la paume de la grenouille” (175). In a world where people and animals coexist in close proximity, the animal comparisons serve as a shortcut to emphasize a specific character trait.

Plants and the natural environment also make frequent appearances in the comparisons: “des bras de branches de fromager” (13), “La prière comporta deux tranches comme une noix de cola” (26), “Comme une gousse de baobab l’oiseau frappa le sol” (75), “la pluie tombait faible en gouttes espacées grosses comme des amandes de karité” (79), “cracha une salive gluante de la fadeur de la sève de baobab” (87), “le maintien sec d’un arbrisseau d’harmattan” (87), “les rues couleur de miel” (97), “Togobala s’étendit, prospéra comme une termitière” (101), “des seins d’ignames, dures et luisants” (101), “en titubant sur des jambes de tiges de mil et en balançant de petites gourdes de ventres poussiéreux” (106), “tel le calme d’un sous-bois rafraîchi par une source au bout d’une longue marche d’harmattan” (108) “se pensait immortel comme un baobab” (115), “Togobala, les Doumbouya et même le Horodougou ne valaient pas en Afrique un grain dans un sac de fonios” (117), and “Le matin était patate douce” (168). These comparisons evoking the natural environment of the West African savanna not only illustrate the situations they describe, but also contribute to the atmosphere of the novel.

There are also an astonishing quantity of images and expressions that are scatological or sexual in nature, such as: “Cette avenue centrale, Fama la connaissait comme le corps de sa femme Salimata” (22), “comme la feuille avec laquelle on a fini de se torcher, les Indépendances une fois acquises, Fama fut oublié et jeté aux mouches” (22), “Aussi superflu et indécent que de descendre pantalon et caleçon pour exhiber un furoncle quand on vous a seulement demandé

pourquoi vous boitez” (29), “Un bâtard, un vrai, un déhonté rejeton de la forêt et d’une maman qui n’a sûrement pas connu ni la moindre bande de tissu, ni la dignité du mariage, osa, debout sur ses deux testicules, sortir de sa bouche que Fama étranger ne pouvait pas traverser sans carte d’identité !” (103-04), “du Togobala qu’il avait dans son cœur il ne restait même plus la dernière pestilence du dernier pet” (105), “une puanteur comme l’approche de l’anus d’une civette” (114), “comme si le coup n’avait été que le pet d’une grand-maman” (128), “plus pauvre que le cache-sexe de l’orphelin” (131), “les femmes propres devenaient rares dans le Horodougou comme les béliers à testicule unique” (135), “Il ne pesait pas plus lourd qu’un duvet d’anus de poule” (138), “toujours indomptable, comme le sexe d’un âne enragé” (141), “Du sang aussi pauvre que les menstrues d’une vieille fille sèche” (143), “impoli à flairer comme un bouc les fesses de sa maman, arrogant comme le sexe d’un âne circoncis” (169), “Fermez vos gueules d’anus d’hyène” (175), “Parfois il [Fama] pensait à la force qui le sollicitait, qui l’a amené à montrer des témérités de verge d’âne qui l’ont plongé dans ce trou” (176), “aussi complexes et mélangés que le sexe d’un canard” (197).

Gassama explains that in the West African oral tradition, there is no such thing as pornography; the images are used to communicate a message. He continues, “Or les parties génitales, dans le fait d’expression, renferment des richesses qui n’échappent ni au locuteur ni à l’allocutaire, car elles appartiennent à ces rares richesses que partagent équitablement le riche et le pauvre ; ces richesses partent de la maternité, de la vie au plaisir, en passant par la perversion ; le pouvoir et les valeurs symboliques des parties génitales sont sans conteste” (108). Kourouma uses these universal symbols to reinforce his message and because they are part of Fama’s and other characters’ natural way of speaking. But above all the comparisons are humorous and serve to lighten the somber themes of the novel.

Every page of *Les Soleils* is filled with comparisons; the few cited here are only a sampling chosen to illustrate the richness and originality of Kourouma's writing. These allegorical or metaphorical formulas, Borgomano notes, are characteristic of African speech (36). For the Malinké (and many Africans), verbal images are a privileged instrument of communication. The comparisons between the human world and the animal, vegetal, and mineral worlds are made for their moral qualities. Thus readers who are unfamiliar with the plants and animals in question may find the associations strange. As Germain Kouassi remarks, these "formules comparatives mettent le sourire aux lèvres au lecteur averti des réalités évoquées ou au contraire laissent perplexes les autres" (268). But the persistent reader who seeks out the meaning of the various elements will find in the images created by these comparisons a description of the West African environment and way of life.

In addition to the comparisons, *Les Soleils* offers a large quantity of proverbs: more than 150 according to Lambert (294). Like the comparisons, the proverbs are linked to the Malinké culture and way of life. They are important in African oral literature, but also as a part of everyday speech. Kourouma's characters often express their thoughts in proverbs or use proverbs to convince others. Fama, Salimata, minor characters, and even the narrator cite proverb after proverb to reinforce their point of view. Borgomano explains, "Cette façon oblique de s'exprimer, ce recours fréquent aux proverbes, sont aussi une imitation du mode d'expression courant chez les Malinkés et, plus généralement, chez beaucoup d'Africains" (20). The use of these proverbs in conversation is an authentically African mode of expression, and the inclusion of so many brings to mind a griot's extensive knowledge of traditional wisdom. The proverbs also have an esthetic value and contribute to the appeal of the novel. Kourouma uses proverbial language even in the chapter titles: "Le molosse et sa déhontée façon de s'asseoir" (7), "Sans la

senteur de goyave verte” (18), “Le cou chargé de carcans hérissés de sortilèges comme le sont de piquants acérés, les colliers du chien chasseur de cynocéphales” (30). In the last example Kourouma makes use of alliteration to add to its oral quality. These titles seem like unfinished proverbs, inviting the reader into the story to hear their continuation.

We already noted that, in his translation of proverbs, Kourouma preserves their linguistic and cultural origins as much as possible. Here are some of the proverbs that appear in *Les Soleils*: “A renifler avec discrétion le pet de l’effronté, il vous juge sans nez” (12), “La vérité il faut la dire, aussi dure qu’elle soit, car elle rougit les pupilles mais ne les casse pas” (15), “L’or ne se ramasse que par celles qui n’ont pas d’oreilles solides pour porter de pesantes boucles” (54), “on ne rassemble pas des oiseaux quand on craint le bruit des ailes” (159), “Où a-t-on vu un trou rempli de ficelles ne présentant pas un seul bout pour tout tirer ?” (159), “C’est en criant plusieurs fois tous les soirs aux chèvres : ‘Entre ! entre ! entre !’ qu’elles finissent par rentrer” (159-60), “Même la guêpe maçonnerie et le crapaud finissent par se tolérer quand on les enferme dans une même case” (160), “Le cougal a été pris au piège, quelles raisons a le francolin de se jeter et rouler à terre en disant qu’il ne passera pas la nuit ?” (164), “là où les graterons percent la coque des œufs de pintade, ce n’est pas un lieu où le mouton à laine peut aller” (175), “Que la récolte du sorgho de l’harmattan prochain soit bonne ou mauvaise, le mourant s’en désintéresse” (195). These proverbs appeal to the imagination and provide a window into the West African milieu. Kouassi states that, in traditional Africa, the proverb serves several social functions: a rhetorical function (it decorates and valorizes), a pragmatic function (it convinces), a pedagogical function (it explains), and a didactic function (it teaches tradition) (346). We should not forget that, in addition to an undeniable esthetic value, proverbs are didactic and coercive. They contribute to the equilibrium of traditional society: an oral society in which verbal expression

regularizes individual behavior (Kouassi 364). So proverbs teach right and wrong, but in a way that is somewhat subjective and open to interpretation. In *Les Soleils* proverbs are liberally used by both Fama and his adversaries and do not prove who is right. Rather, their frequent inclusion illustrates and preserves an important aspect of Malinké culture. Kourouma's use of the proverbs in the modern setting of the novel shows that they are still applicable today.

As if all these elements from orality were not enough, Kourouma also found a way to insert excerpts of traditional oral genres into the novel. Borgomano cites three examples: a genealogical account of the origins of the Doumbouya of Horodougou, a Malinké wedding song, and a hunter's song (49). Fama remembers the genealogical account on a sleepless night and it seems he often heard it as a child. The account predicts the end of the once glorious dynasty and Fama realizes with resignation that he has seen the predictions realized in his lifetime and that the end is near. The wedding song is one that accompanies the goodbyes of a bride to her family. Sadness dominates in the song and it is ironic that Fama should remember this particular song when he is returning at last to his native village after so many years in the capital. Perhaps he knows that things will not be as he remembers them. One of the poignant lines of the song serves as the title of the chapter: "marcher à pas comptés dans la nuit du cœur et dans l'ombre des yeux" (105). Borgomano proposes, "son expression poétique et mélancolique donnent au chapitre, qui d'abord pourrait paraître heureux, une tonalité triste et angoissée" (49). The song warns us that sadness, not joy, is waiting for Fama in Togobala.

The hunter's song, despite its integration in the story as the recitation of Balla's exploits, is another example of a traditional genre. Hunters, an elect group known for their skills in the wild, but also for their magical powers, tell this kind of story. The reader is alerted to the fact that this passage differs from the rest of the story by supernatural exploits, such as the pact

between the hunter and a genie and the series of metamorphoses that each undergoes in their epic battle. The inclusion of this song introduces magic, a part of Malinké culture, into the novel. The story is presented as a part of reality despite the events that are completely unbelievable to most readers. Borgomano explains the dilemma that this hunter's song creates: "Mythe ? ou réalité ? Merveilleux, univers à part des contes ? ou fantastique, lieu de l'incertitude de l'hésitation ? La question se pose sans cesse en Afrique et la démarcation entre 'merveilleux' et 'réel' reste toujours floue et insaisissable" (50). The hunter's song, with its magic and genies, is an important genre in Mande oral literature and Kourouma includes it in the novel.

The excerpts of traditional oral genres, from the genealogical account of the glory of yesteryear, to the sweet and melancholic wedding song, to the supernatural hunter's song, contribute to the novel's surprising variety of voices. Once again the reader is disarmed by the author's artistic talent. The constantly varying tone and form do not allow the reader to become complacent. And when we consider the humor and irony that run through the novel, very often the reader doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. Sometimes it seems, as Gassama puts it, that the author "s'amuse au dépens du lecteur" (28). The humor is evident in the numerous salacious comparisons. Could the author be serious when he compares Fama to "la feuille avec laquelle on a fini de se torcher, [...] oublié et jeté aux mouches" (22)? Or when he states that Fama "devenait intraitable comme un âne nouvellement circoncis" (132)? These comparisons and many others produce a comic effect and evoke the reader's laughter despite the pessimistic undercurrents of the novel. Even Fama's constant insults become comical. Almost everyone that he encounters ends up "un bâtard" or "un fils de chien". Fama presents a rather ridiculous spectacle with his insults and his pride.

Irony has a constant presence in the work as well, especially surrounding the character of Fama, the prince who has become a scavenger. He demands respect but often behaves in a shameful way; he insists on the power of his name, but shows himself to be impotent in all aspects of his life. There is also an irony about independence which, after a long and difficult struggle to obtain, ends up being just as bad as colonization was: “Mais alors, qu’apportèrent les Indépendances à Fama ? Rien que la carte d’identité nationale et celle du parti unique” (23), and the country border that divides a people: “Mais on était Malinké, et le Malinké ne reste jamais sur une seule rive” (137). The novel is filled with ironic situations and the narrator uses abundant irony and sarcasm in his narration. He says: “Vous les connaissez bien : les Malinkés ont beaucoup de méchancetés et Allah se fatigue d’assouvir leur malveillance” (116) and “La politique n’a ni yeux, ni oreilles, ni cœur ; en politique le vrai et le mensonge portent le même pagne, le juste et l’injuste marchent de pair, le bien et le mal s’achètent ou se vendent au même prix” (164). Irony becomes a way for the author to criticize society, much in the same way as the traditional oral performances of his people. Kouassi explains, “L’ironie par dramatisation est bien le reflet de la vivacité de la parole africaine et constitue un témoignage de l’art verbal africain dans les veillées de conte au clair de lune” (387). In his novel, Kourouma continues this tradition by using irony to express his discontentment with the political leadership and with the trajectory he perceives his country to be taking.

In *Les Soleils des indépendances*, Kourouma tells a story from an African point of view, making liberal use of the oral techniques and genres of traditional Africa. The importance of these techniques is that they come together to highlight African perspectives and African voices. By transforming French syntax and verbal tenses; and by integrating neologisms, changing narrative perspectives, interjections, comparisons rich in local color, proverbs, traditional oral

genres, irony and humor, Kourouma succeeds in transmitting a uniquely African vision of the world. He explains in his interview with Ouedraogo:

C'est que l'histoire africaine, que ce soit la littérature africaine ou la cosmogonie africaine, porte des réalités, des connaissances que certainement nous devons défendre, maintenir. C'est pourquoi je crois au point de vue technique de conter, la technique de l'écriture, la technique de l'oralité, il faut les préserver. (778)

And Kourouma succeeds in preserving an aspect of his heritage with this work. It manifests his African identity by integrating elements from African orality into a novel written in French. Most importantly, it allows for the expression of African voices.

Twenty years after the appearance of *Les Soleils des indépendances*, Kourouma published his second novel: *Monnè, outrages et défis*. Many of the oral techniques that he used in *Les Soleils* are incorporated in this second novel to a certain degree, but the center of interest changes. Kenneth Harrow explains that it is the use of words and of language that interest the author in *Monnè* more than the message that they communicate. In the first novel, the focus is on the themes of decline and degradation in postcolonial African society, recounted in an oral style. In contrast, Harrow states, *Monnè* “returns us to the discourse itself, which is used to narrate the history of Africa’s decline – and specifically the decline of Malinké greatness from the time of the French conquest until the end of the colonial period” (227). *Monnè* differs from *Les Soleils* in the author’s consciousness of the impact of words and languages not only on the reader, but also on the characters in the story. Borgomano proposes that the work that Kourouma put into the language of *Les Soleils* “l’avait amené à la prise de conscience du rôle essentiel que jouent les questions linguistiques dans la colonisation” (39-40). *Monnè* becomes a study of the importance of language and the impossibility of translating from one language and culture to

another. As in *Les Soleils*, Kourouma uses traditional African techniques to tell the story and he adds a consciousness of the identity crisis that results when the language of a people is not valorized.

Kourouma uses two languages to communicate his story: French and Malinké. It seems that the languages are completely incompatible; throughout the novel mutual incomprehension reigns between the two peoples. There seems to be no satisfactory way to translate between the two languages and cultures; an element of uncertainty traverses the novel. The translation and communication problems begin with the title and epigraph of the novel. The title “Monnè, outrages et défis” is bilingual and enigmatic. Kourouma explains in his interview with Ouédraogo, “*Monnè, outrages et défis* parce que le mot *monnè* je n'arrive pas à trouver comment le traduire, donc j'emploie plusieurs mots pour dire que cela représente une partie de ces idées, mais pas la totalité” (775). For the reader, it's the epigraph that explains the title. In the epigraph, the African king asks a white colonist how to say *monnè* in French. The colonist answers with a string of possibilities: “Outrages, défis, mépris, injures, humiliations, colère rageuse, tous ces mots à la fois sans qu'aucun le traduise véritablement [...] En vérité, il n'y a pas chez nous, Européens, une parole rendant totalement le *monnè* malinké” (9). The African, astonished by this revelation, concludes that since a translation for the word does not exist in the French language, *monnè* must not occur in France. The uncertain translation contributes to his faulty, though meaningful, conclusion. Even before the novel proper begins, Kourouma effectively establishes the problems of communication and translation between the languages. The epigraph, “résum[e] l'esprit du roman” (Borgomano 128).

The arrival of the French and their Malinké interpreter, Soumaré, triggers multiple communication and translation problems. The interpreter does not translate Djigui's belligerence

towards the French. Instead, he takes charge of the situation, inventing a peaceful welcome on Djigui's behalf. He explains to Djigui that he has saved his life:

Arrête de gesticuler ; le Blanc pourrait avoir des soupçons. Il croit que tu es heureux de l'arrivée des Français, que tu nous as offert la colline Kouroufi pour nous installer et te protéger [...] Il y a quelques semaines, des troupes de Samory ont traîtreusement massacré une colonne française. Plus de compromis possible entre « samoriens » et nous ; systématiquement, nous fusillons tous les chefs alliés de Samory. Sans moi, c'eût été ton sort. (37)

Samory Touré was an African leader who violently resisted the French advancement in West Africa until his capture in 1898. Soumaré (despite the similar name) is the anti-Samory and represents the opposite response to the French aggression - collaboration. Djigui planned to follow Samory's example of resistance, but Soumaré's false translation reduces Djigui to silence and makes him into a collaborator. Perhaps the interpreter acted out of good intentions, nevertheless he dispossesses Djigui of speech and thus of power.

The interpreter, who uses the pronoun "nous" when speaking of French policies, is not for all that accepted by the French. Ouédraogo explains that his situation is tragic, despite the enormous power he possesses. Soumaré can manipulate Djigui's and the French commander's words to influence the unfolding of events, but all this power leaves him without an identity and without a country. Ouédraogo continues, "Trahison, duplicité, dualisme, loyauté équivoque hantent l'interprète" (*Indicible* 47) and he finds himself rejected by both his native land and his adoptive culture. Soumaré is at once traitor and ally, pulled between two worlds, solicited by two cultures without ever being accepted by either, and he suffers, "du vertige de l'aliénation et de l'inadaptation" (*Indicible* 53). His translations are not exact, not only because of his

manipulation, but also because of his incompetence in French and, often, the lack of equivalent terms between the two languages. We discover, but only towards the end of the book, that Soumaré speaks in a gibberish that is frequently incomprehensible to the French. And, following the interpreter's inaccurate translations, the griot, as his role dictates, repeats and comments on what is said for the benefit of those gathered around. The griot's commentary is necessary to legitimize the interpreter's words with the appropriate rhetorical forms, but adds another layer of distortion to the communication. Gyasi sees in this situation an allegory for the difficulty experienced by African authors writing in European languages (161). True communication through the translation of languages and cultures is difficult, if not impossible.

Soumaré's translations and the distortions added by the griot Djéliaba are often humorous. For example, the French commander tells Djigui that he will need to provide "prestataires" (people who would be pressed into temporary service). The narrator explains, "Faute de trouver le mot correspondant en malinké, l'interprète utilisa dans notre langue le mot 'prestataires' que le griot eut de la peine à articuler et à changer en *pratati*" (55). The word has no meaning in Malinké and leaves Djigui confused. Next, the interpreter tries to explain the grand design of colonization: civilization, which the interpreter translates as "devenir toubab" (57). ("Toubab" is a term of unclear origin, used throughout West Africa to mean "white person".) Djigui is alarmed, fearing that he will be forced to change his religion, but the interpreter assures him that, "La civilisation, c'est gagner de l'argent des Blancs" (57). Later, when World War I breaks out and the French begin recruiting the men of Soba for their army, the interpreter announces that the evil "Allamas" have attacked the French. Djigui is perplexed again, "Ou l'interprète avait mal prononcé le nom des agresseurs, ou nous avons mal entendu ; je lui ai demandé de se répéter : il nous paraissait invraisemblable que les 'Allamas' dont le nom signifie en malinké 'sauvés par

Allah seul' puissent être aussi mécréants et cruels qu'il le traduisait" (83). When the commander tries to explain the situation after World War II, the same kinds of problems present themselves:

Le Blanc parla, se perdit dans de longs développements politico-historiques. Il parla, trop et vite, avec des néologismes : fascisme, pétainisme, gaullisme, marxisme, capitalisme, le monde libre... Des mots intraduisibles que l'interprète a introduits en malinké, que le griot a répétés et commentés sans connaître les sens. Pour le Centenaire et ses suivants, c'étaient des paroles de tons d'oiseaux que les mauvaises prononciations du traducteur et du commentateur rendaient étranges. Après une bonne demi-heure de palabre, Djigui restait perplexe. (217-18)

Here we see how the lack of cultural understanding and shared experience makes creating a successful translation extremely challenging. The situation between Djigui and the French becomes more and more absurd as no attempt is made to understand each other's culture or create a shared experience: "L'interprète a dit *gnibaité* pour liberté ; dans les commentaires du griot, cette *gnibaité* est devenu *nabata* qui littéralement signifie 'vient prendre maman'" (218). It is doubtful that with such translations, Djigui and the people of Soba could ever comprehend the commander's messages. Remarkably, after forty years of cohabitation, the same translation problems persist between the two languages.

The translation errors become deliberate when Djigui's sons begin rivaling each other for political power:

Les malveillants, Kélétigui et ses codétenus, les ennemis de Béma, avaient traduit le mot progressiste par *progrissi* et les Malinkés n'avaient retenu que les consonances terminales, *sissi*, qui signifient « fumée ». Toujours par malignité, les mêmes avaient

prétendu que les initiales PREP se disaient *prou* qui est le son de l'échappement d'un éhonté pet à un mauvais mangeur de haricots. (265)

This manipulation of meanings, a continuation of what Soumaré did, allows certain Africans to profit from the confused linguistic situation. Knowing the poor state of communication in the kingdom of Soba, they give negative connotations to the names of their opponents' political parties.

Borgomano notes that there is no reciprocity in the translations. She writes, "la traduction fonctionne essentiellement dans un seul sens : du français vers le malinké, pour donner des ordres et obtenir les *prestations*. Pour cela, nul besoin de comprendre l'autre, l'africain, et nul besoin non plus de se faire comprendre au-delà des exigences très matérielles, et, de plus, imposées par la force" (168). The African finds himself completely cut off from true communication with the aggressors, with no way of making himself understood and, anyway, without any desire on the part of the French to understand his point of view. The message is clear; the Malinké language and culture have no value for the colonists. The indigenous people are condemned to a position of silence and inferiority, and begin to believe that they deserve nothing more. As Borgomano points out, the linguistic outrage becomes one of the worst *monnew* suffered by the people of Soba (174).

The difficulties encountered in the translations, even when all the parties concerned sincerely wish to communicate, indicates a fundamental problem. Guy Ossito Midiohouan writes of a cultural incompatibility between the French and the Malinké; they have divergent ambitions, dreams, and visions of the world. The characters experience, "the impossibility of mutually comprehensible linguistic communication. Just as Malinké means nothing to the French, French means nothing to the Malinké" (234). Translation fails faced with this

impossibility of expressing foreign realities and experiences. Gyasi explains that the novel highlights the need for effective translation and interpretation, but also uses irony to show that effective translation and interpretation are impossible (159). The only hope for mutual communication is that Kourouma, an African, writes novels in French. He writes in a French influenced by African traditions, recounts the story with an African perspective, and succeeds in communicating with Westerners and Africans at the same time. The author, through this novel that strikingly illustrates the barriers to communication, succeeds in surmounting them, at least in part, with its publication.

One of the aspects that reveals the different worldviews of the French and the Malinké is their conception of time. The novel integrates two antagonistic conceptions of time, illustrated in the passage on Djigui's age. When the people of Soba affirm that their king has reached his 125th birthday, the commander is astonished and turns to the interpreter who explains:

Les Nègres de Soba ne savent pas calculer leur âge. Ils pratiquent une culture itinérante et décomptent le nombre d'exploitations mises en jachère depuis la naissance de l'individu. Ce nombre est multiplié par cinq ; le champ étant supposé être cultivé pendant cinq ans, alors qu'il arrive que les *lougan* soient délaissés après quatre et même trois ans quand la sécheresse sévit. (100)

The white doctor who is present adds, "Les Nègres sont des menteurs. Djigui a au plus soixante-quinze ans ; ce qui pour un indigène n'est pas rien" (100). The people of Soba certainly do calculate differently than the Europeans. Their variables are linked to the natural environment and the cycle of the seasons. But the French do not admit the possibility of a legitimate system that differs from theirs. Thinking and calculating differently than they do is therefore either ignorance or lying. But the passage provides a third point of view on this question of Djigui's

age: the collective perspective of Soba: “Rien n’avait ébranlé ceux de Soba dans leur calcul ; pour eux, Djigui avait cent vingt-cinq ans, pas un de moins. Cent vingt-cinq, âge fatidique, maximal qu’aucun humain de chez nous ne doit dépasser. Dire à Soba d’un vieillard qu’il a plus de cent vingt-cinq ans, c’est lui jeter un mauvais sort” (100). Here we see a religious and ritual conception of the human life. Djigui’s age is not based on a mathematical calculation, but on much more complex cultural factors.

Throughout the novel, these two different conceptions of time are visible. For the French, Africa’s colonization allows the continent an “entrée dans l’histoire”. But for the Africans, colonization represents “une rupture brutale avec le passé et même une sorte de dépossession du temps” (Borgomano 177). They had a history and a civilization before the arrival of the Europeans upset everything. That is why the period they call *Boribana* (end of backing down) is so important for Djigui and Djéliba. After having lost all of his power, the king symbolically resists colonization in a struggle the griot named after one of Samory’s resistances. The narrator explains:

Nous n’avions pas été colonisés parce que nous n’avions pas été vaincus après une bataille rangée. Nous n’avons jamais engagé de bataille, parce que le scélérat, le serpent d’interprète Soumaré avait débité des menteries aux Blancs.

En les rejetant, nous nous trouvions *ipso facto* quarante ans en arrière, en situation de guerre. (185)

This symbolic return to the past is so important, according to Borgomano, for two reasons. The people of Soba seek to regain their pride but also, “rendre au temps sa forme cyclique, retrouver leur propre temps cyclique : ils ont absolument besoin, après tous ces *monnew*, d’une compensation symbolique, d’une restauration de leur identité” (184). Unfortunately, Djigui’s

symbolic resistance has no effect and it seems that linear time prevails. Soba's *monnè* seems permanent for the duration of the novel, stretching out over a century.

Nonetheless, an African conception of time dominates the structure of the novel. Time seems fluid as past, present, and future mingle. Often, the narration skips forward or back without warning to the reader. For example, the first chapter begins with Djigui, king of Soba, presiding over a great sacrifice, then goes back to the moment when Djigui became king and explains the circumstances that pushed him to make this sacrifice. The narration continues describing the sacrifice before going back again to a prophesy that dates from ancient times. Once again in the present of the story, the prophesy is fulfilled by the arrival of a messenger. But then the narration accelerates to describe the unexpected arrival of messenger after messenger. This back-and-forth movement in time continues throughout the novel and demonstrates Kourouma's valorization of an African conception of time. By choosing to write his story in a cyclical rather than linear manner, the author creates a novel that reflects an African perspective on time.

Another obstacle to true communication is the constant presence of lies in the novel. In fact, lies abound in the kingdom of Soba long before the arrival of the colonists. When Djigui becomes king the griots tell him that his kingdom is a completed work, free from *monnè*. But, when the young king tours his kingdom he discovers unending problems and realizes: "Menteries, tout, tous m'ont menti" (16). The society was built on lies: "les gens n'allaient pas au-delà de ce que les marabouts, les sorciers, les devins et les féticheurs affirmaient : la communauté entière croyait à ses mensonges" (20). The lies of these authority figures assured the stability of society and promoted the preservation of tradition, but allowed for the continued oppression of many individuals.

When the colonists arrived, they used and perverted these same lies for their own ends. When forcibly recruiting young men to be soldiers, the interpreter explains it like a kind of initiation: “On entre dans les tirailleurs comme dans un bois sacré ; on rompt avec son clan, sa famille, son groupe d’âge ; on vend son âme aux Blancs et on cesse d’avoir de la compassion pour le Nègre. Allah a fait le vaincu et a dans Ses mains le destin des défaits” (62). By explaining entrance in the army like an initiation rite, the interpreter gives cultural authority to the institution. And by evoking the name of Allah, Soumaré gives it a religious authority as well. Next, the interpreter assures Djigui that if he follows all the laws of the White Man he will become a great king celebrated in griots’ songs forever. The narrator intervenes at this moment: “Ce fut là un mensonge aussi gros que les immeubles que le Blanc allait bâtir ; mensonge dont Djigui très souvent se souviendrait. Ce qui advint fut tout autre ; de l’urine de ceux de Soba sont sortis les crocodiles qui les ont mordus” (64). Djigui’s collaboration with the French was based on lies and misunderstandings and was, in the final analysis, disastrous for him and his people.

Lies about the Africans’ character and temperament are recounted by the colonists and repeated by the Africans themselves throughout the novel. The interpreter often says this sort of thing: “Nous, les Noirs, nous avons été mal fabriqués : il faut nous chicoter au rythme des tam-tams pour nous faire bien travailler” (66) and “C’est vraiment malheureux qu’Allah nous ait mal fabriqués, nous, Nègres ; Il nous a créés menteurs de sorte que le Noir n’accepte de dire la vérité que la plante de pied posée sur la braise” (81). The interpreter works for the colonists and therefore understandably repeats their ideology, but even the narrator makes similarly degrading comments: “Les Nègres sont des maudits et des sans cœur, de vrais maudits – ce n’est pas sans raison que Dieu les a fabriqués noirs. Rien de plus méchant pour un Noir qu’un autre Noir” (84); “Les Noirs naissent menteurs. Il est impossible d’écrire une histoire vraie de Mandingue”

(85); and “(les Noirs sont lâches et menteurs)” (265). Djigui himself insists, “De même que le rat des champs ne peut être sorti de son trou sans enfumage, de même on ne peut extirper aux Nègres la capitation et des travailleurs forcés sans torture et incendie” (219). Béma, Djigui’s son, propagates lies for his own interests and tells the colonial leaders: “Nous, les Nègres, nous sommes comme la tortue, sans la braise aux fesses nous ne courons jamais” (256) and “La reconquête de Soba, pour qu’elle soit suivie d’une paix réelle et longue, a besoin d’être cruelle. C’est ainsi que Allah nous a fabriqués, nous Nègres” (261). Even the more sympathetic Europeans continue to propagate stereotypes: “Heureusement, les Noirs sont naturellement gentils et pusillanimes” (258) et “le Noir est naturellement gentil, bon et obéissant” (219). Karim Traoré explains that Kourouma uses negative clichés as a narrative tool; their presence exposes the lie in reducing it to absurdity (1352). He continues, “The observations are lies, imported ones. Indeed, they reflect the opinions of the conquerors” (1354). By irony or tragic complicity, Africans in the novel propagate the lies. But, finally, the author’s repetition of these clichés renders them unbelievable and absurd.

In several ways the story of Djigui resembles an epic from the Malinké oral tradition. Bassirou Dieng explains that *Monnè* recounts the exploits of a king. Like the hero of a traditional epic, Djigui organizes the world; all historical events are recounted according to their relationship with the king. In other parallels with an epic hero, predictions announce Djigui’s life and a destabilization of the world follows his death (40). At the beginning of the novel Djigui makes important decisions based on prophecies he has received. He prepares his people for the arrival of a messenger in red, predicted centuries earlier, and does not follow Samory because of a prediction about his dynasty’s continuation. At his death chaos and misunderstandings erupt as his people attempt to mourn his passing. The narrator insists, “Après

Djigui, notre pays a cessé d'être ce qu'il était" (281). Borgomano adds that even the titles of the first and last chapters evoke an epic hero (130): "Un homme façonné avec de la bonne argile, franc, charitable et matineux" and "Nous avons prié pour que la terre lui soit légère mais nous nous sommes interdit de lui dire adieu". Throughout the novel, the world is presented in an unbalanced epic style and the griot's presence is constant as he composes songs for the king that are integrated into the story.

Despite all that, *Monnè* is rather a parody of an epic. Traoré explains that Djigui lacks the dynamism of a true epic hero. He suffers passively while colonial administrators act. The griot Djéliaba is obliged to compose songs of *monnè* rather than of heroic actions. And, in the place of the grand and somber tone of a traditional epic, Kourouma writes with irony and sarcasm (1358-59). Djigui becomes absurd because of an unjustified glory and his ridicule provokes the tragedy of his people (Dieng 43). He is an antihero. Traoré adds that while Kourouma mocks the content of the epic genre, he engages in its style and language (1361). The sarcasm serves to criticize ancient society, but the form of the novel recalls the glory of this period. The style of *Monnè* is unique in allowing the glorious aspects of traditional Africa to periodically emerge despite the narrator's frequent recourse to sarcasm and irony. In a valorization of African identity, *Monnè* imitates many of the techniques of the epic, including the frequent inclusion of the griot's songs.

The narration of *Monnè* is unique above all because the author integrates a multiplicity of voices into the work. I noted in *Les Soleils* that the narrator expresses the thoughts of different characters in their own words through free indirect discourse. In *Monnè*, the narrator seems to float: different characters assume at times the role of narrator. Traoré explains that the work is a profound reflection on the philosophy of narration. He states, "Kourouma practices a

deconstruction of discourse by using parodic features and by narrating the same events from different perspectives” (Traoré 1349). Borgomano notes that the narration varies between contradictory modalities, seems impersonal and personal at the same time, and that the narrator purposefully adapts a contradictory and fluctuating status (142). Throughout the novel, she identifies at least five narrators, or, as she puts it, “cinq sujets du verbe, implicite, raconter” (162). There are the metanarrator, three occasional narrators (Djigui, Djéliiba, and Fadoua) and the collective narrator.

The metanarrator, explains Dieng, is anonymous and both witness and actor in the events he recounts (39). Borgomano uses the term “narrateur-régisseur” for this impersonal voice that dominates and organizes the other voices, but that is not completely separated from them (162). The metanarrator assumes the voice of a modern historian when he explains the tradition of the predicted messenger: “C’est au XII^e siècle que Tiéwouré, le plus grand devin que le Mandingue ait engendré, à un aïeul de Djigui annonça [...]” (18). In addition to historian, the metanarrator acts as judge as well. Borgomano notes that he is neither neutral nor indifferent; he shares his opinions, his judgments, and his explanations, establishing a communication with the contemporary Western reader (163). Here the metanarrator describes Djigui’s inheritance:

La vérité était que rien n’avait été renouvelé dans le Mandingue depuis des siècles. Le pays était un lougan en friche, une case abandonnée dont le toit de toutes parts fuyait, dont les murs lézardés s’écroulaient [...] Le legs était un monde suranné que des griots archaïques disaient avec des mots obsolètes. (16)

The metanarrator’s words contain judgment. He gives, according to Borgomano, “une évaluation dépréciative sévère, qui, outre la distance temporelle, suppose aussi une distance critique et une différence de perspective” (143). In this passage, the narrator is outside of the

story, but a few pages later his contradictions are exposed. He recounts the words of the long-awaited messenger: “–Pendant huit soleils et soirs j’ai voyagé pour venir vous annoncer que les Toubabs de ‘Fadarba’ descendent vers le sud. (Par ‘Fadarba’ il fallait entendre Faidherbe, le général français qui conduit le Sénégal)” (19). This intervention situates the narrator explicitly outside of Soba and of the action of the story, in a later time and possessing superior knowledge. But, at the same time, Borgomano notes the curious use of the present tense: “le général qui conduit le Sénégal”. With that, the narrator blends with the people of Soba and becomes their contemporary (Borgomano 147). He seems to be both part of and outside of the story.

In another instance, the metanarrator places himself in time with the appearance of the novel: “Le Kèbi de Soba existe toujours comme il a été bâti, sauf le toit de paille qui a été remplacé par des tôles ondulées. Grande bâtisse coloniale blanche avec, tout autour, de larges vérandas” (64). The present used here is outside of the story, a present of narration. The narrator seems to be a contemporary of the reader and this interruption gives at least an illusion of reality to the existence of Soba. The metanarrator is thus very complex and not easily categorized. The situation becomes yet more complicated as other voices take over.

Monnè is characterized by a “plurivocal” narration in which some of the characters, representatives of the historical or artistic word, take over the narration at key moments, designating themselves with the pronoun “je” (Dieng 39). Djigui does this most frequently, on important occasions like his refusal to Samory: “Moi, Djigui, je ne pouvais pas quitter Soba !” (32); when forced to submit to the French: “Moi, Djigui, roi de Soba, je me suis réveillé, levé” (47) and “Je répétais lentement et de la même voix cassée et résignée : –Le roi de Soba, Djigui Keita, vient vous saluer” (65), when he is invited to visit France : “J’allais enfin connaître le pays des Blancs” (103) and, among other examples, when he is displeased with the marabout

Yacouba: “Une fois encore, il me déplût, à moi Djigui, au point que je me suis mis encore à regretter le passé, à me redire que la vieillesse n’est qu’insultes et ressentiments” (161).

In rare moments, very significant in the king’s life, the griot Djéliaba takes over the narration. This happens most often in a setting that evokes a traditional epic. During their symbolic resistance the griot narrates, “Le long de tout un soleil, moi, Djéliaba, je racontais et chantais” (189) and he continues, “C’est pendant le *Boribana* que j’ai révélé ou, mieux, créé l’histoire officielle de la dynastie des Keita” (190). The griot in service to King Djigui does not experience many events that would allow him to compose heroic songs. Therefore he invents past exploits or composes songs of *monnè*, giving a poetic name to each era of Djigui’s life: “le *monnè* dense”, “les saisons d’amertume”, “fin des reculades”.

The final occasional narrator is Fadoua, Djigui’s minister. He takes over the narration on only one occasion saying, “A mon retour du Kébi, moi, Fadoua, je m’étais glissé à pas feutrés entre les courtisans et avais gagné ma place. En silence” (177). He continues, explaining how he followed and killed every visitor who came to complain to the king. The fact that it is Fadoua who speaks preserves Djigui’s virtue and reinforces the possibility of the king’s innocence in the matter. Fadoua admits, “Personne ne parlait du visiteur ni de mon crime. Djigui n’y faisait jamais allusion, au point que je me suis encore à me demander, bien que cela soit improbable, si le Centenaire ne les avait tous ignorés” (177). The different occasional narrators embody varying perspectives and reveal different information about various situations.

In addition to the metanarrator and the distinct occasional narrators, there is also a collective narrator who uses the pronoun “nous” and who represents the people of Soba, the king’s followers, or a more specific group of people. Gasster explains that the collective narrator is a group of witnesses who are directly implicated in the story and who recount their

experiences, inserting their own commentaries or responses from folklore or from Islam (171). Near the beginning of the novel the collective narrator first appears, “Heureusement pour la destinée du Mandingue et la nôtre – qu’Allah en soit loué –, Djigui avait été façonné de la bonne argile, une argile bénie. Rapidement, il s’était lassé de cette vie frivole indigne du roi d’un pays aimé d’Allah comme le nôtre” (15). In this passage we see the implication of the narrator in the story by the use of “nôtre” and the commentaries referring to Islam “qu’Allah en soit loué”, “un pays aimé d’Allah”. The collective narrator continues to appear throughout the novel: “Nous redoutons tous la réaction de notre roi” (46); “Nous tremblâmes de peur” (61); “Djigui ne le crut pas et nous, ceux de Soba, non plus” (99); “Nous, ses suivants et ses serviteurs, restions toute la journée le regard rivé sur ses lèvres” (107); and “Mais – nous le savons – circulent diverses versions de l’événement” (213). The use of these multiple narrators establishes a collective consciousness throughout the novel. In the “nous”, the narrator mixes and confounds himself with the characters (Borgomano 132). It is impossible to distinguish just one voice that tells the story. Rather, like at evening gatherings, the entire group participates in the act of recounting. The presence of multiple witnesses makes the story truly that of the people of Soba, not just Djigui’s story. The hardships of colonization fell mostly on these people and it is important that their voices be heard.

In addition to the use of fluctuating narrators Kourouma creates a state of uncertainty with the inclusion of several versions of the same events. Often, passages are presented ambiguously, with various possible interpretations. When Djigui is required to drink the *déguè* in a ceremony of submission to the French while the griot composes a melancholic song of *monnè*, this could be interpreted as a great humiliation for Djigui. But, at the same time, there is a sort of symbolic victory when Djigui gets up and, accompanied by his griot, shows himself

worthy and stands proudly before his conquerors. The Friday visit, which he accomplishes every week to renew his submission to the French, becomes for Djigui an affirmation of his identity and continuity. The narrator affirms that this weekly visit, “allait être un des rites les plus marquants du règne de Djigui Keita, roi de Soba” (49). Even Djigui’s two closest servants, Djéliaba and Fadoua, do not agree about these Friday visits. Djéliaba wants to put an end to them as they reduce the king to a position of servility, but Fadoua insists that they accord dignity and power to the king.

Djigui takes French lessons for a short period of time, resulting in more misunderstandings. The instructor asks him to repeat the phrase “Mamadou amène sa sœur” which in Malinké resembles: “Mamadou saisis-le et attache-le” (231). Only the king has the authority to give such an order and, offended, he ends the lesson for that day. The following week the instructor teaches the phrase, “le chat voit bien même la nuit”, but Djigui hears : “le vagin de la maman de Zan sauce gluante” (232). This time Djigui ends the French lessons for good. He concludes that, “le français était un langage de déshonneur et indicible par un croyant et un grand chef : il s’interdit de le parler et de le comprendre” (232). However, the narrator casts doubt on this reason for Djigui’s refusal to learn French by offering another:

On a dit que tout cela ne fut que ruse : [Djigui] comprenait, en plus du malinké, le sénoufo et le peul et savait qu’une langue ne se traduisait pas par les consonances entendues. C’est pour des motifs politiques et religieux plus sérieux qu’il arrêta les cours. Il connaissait plus que tout autre l’arbitraire des commandants. Maintenir un interprète entre le Blanc et lui, c’était se réserver une distance, quelques libertés, un temps de réflexion, des possibilités de réticences et de commentaires ; entretenir une certaine incompréhension. (232)

The two versions for why Djigui never learned French echo the uncertainty and ambivalence found throughout the novel.

Perhaps the most uncertain and ambiguous passages of *Monnè* are those that deal with Moussokoro, the woman who becomes Djigui's favorite wife. Even their relationship is ambiguous since Moussokoro bears the name of Djigui's mother and is young enough to be his daughter. He says to her, "Tu es à la fois, ma fille, ma mère et mon épouse" (134). The people of Soba hate Moussokoro and her story is constantly interrupted by contradictory versions. After a description of the circumstances of her birth, the narrator interrupts himself saying, "Qu'y avait-il de solide dans cette biographie ? 'Peu... très peu de grains. Elle était née fabulatrice et c'était elle qui dictait cette relation des faits aux griots', répondaient le petit peuple de Soba" (132). Contestations like this continue throughout the passages that recount Moussokoro's life, and even her death is veiled in doubt. The narrator recounts that when she learns of the death of her husband, she wraps herself in a shroud and leaves Soba on foot to await Djigui's body in Toukoro, the sacred village where he will be buried; she never arrives. The narrator adds that according to rumor she gathered up her riches and went to join her mother in Timbuktu where she lived a comfortable life. He concludes, "Ce sont des allégations sûrement fausses ; ceux de Soba qui n'avaient jamais aimé Moussokoro et qui sont nègres donc fabulateurs ont certainement, une fois encore, menti" (286). Despite this abrupt assertion, the reader remains uncertain about what really happened. The rumors and accusations against her show just how much a woman like Moussokoro disturbs the world of Soba. She is doubtless a controversial figure, being a strong and manipulative woman who takes charge of her destiny. By including contradicting versions of her life, the author invites his readers to interpret Moussokoro as they

wish. The contradictions serve as a reminder to question biographies as they can portray people in disparate ways.

Like in *Les Soleils*, the influence of African oral literature is evident throughout *Monnè*. Kourouma makes generous use of metaphors and proverbs to enrich the text. Often, the comparisons evoke the environment of the Sahel or the daily life of the Malinké and are important not only to establish the orality of the text, but also its African character. These few examples show the beauty and importance of the comparisons: “Son visage paraissait taillé dans de l’acier et malgré le sourire éclatant qu’il afficha, le regard était celui de l’oiseau de proie : insoutenable” (26), “claire comme une pleine lune sur la savane en harmattan” (29), “Ils l’avaient escaladée comme s’enjambent le seuil de la case et les cuisses d’une femme déhontée” (34), “Cela doit être connu comme les sourates de prière, bien connu comme les perles de fesses de la préférée” (54), “Vrai comme une noix de cola blanche” (58), “les quatre mâles ayant la taille de fromager, la poitrine de lion, la dentition de caïman et la santé de taureau” (62), “C’était aussi vrai que l’eustache du circonciseur” (63), “L’indigène serait dans son canton comme un cob dans une brousse cernée par les archers et les chiens” (63). These comparisons permit the reader to imagine the setting of the story and to appreciate the importance of the events in an African context.

The presence of many proverbs in the novel affirms the importance of traditional African wisdom. As we saw in *Les Soleils*, Africans often express themselves using proverbs and Kourouma preserves this way of speaking in *Monnè* also, with nearly every African character in the novel making use of them. A selection of these proverbs follows: “Avant d’entreprendre le long voyage, nettoions notre case de tous les rats” (26), “Allah n’est de la classe d’âge ni le frère de plaisanterie de personne d’ici-bas” (48), “Les louanges sont indispensables à la force comme

la parure l'est à la belle femme" (54), "Celui qui craint la destruction de ses épis par les singes demeure dans son *lougan*" (54), "On ne circonci pas sans mutiler et faire saigner" (59), "Même dans les flambes de l'enfer, il existera un arbre qui prodiguera de l'ombre à quelques chanceux" (62), "un margouillat ne se taille pas une culotte sans aménager un trou pour la sortie de la queue" (63), "mêmes les lycæons ne suivent qu'un autre lycæon" (244). The proverbs embellish and authenticate the characters' discourse.

Another oral technique present in *Monnè* is repetition. We already noted the appearance throughout the novel of the "Nègre menteur". The repetition of this negative stereotype becomes a refrain that ridicules the White colonists' position. Another instance of repetition is when the interpreter explains taxes and prestations to Djigui. He insists several times that even those who cannot pay will pay anyway. Djéliba makes a song out of it:

Si tu n'en as pas : tu en auras quand même.

Si tu n'en veux pas : tu l'aimeras quand même.

Si tu ne peux pas : tu le réussiras quand même... (59).

This repetition in the form of a song comes directly from oral literature, as does the presence of the song in the story. The content of the song, however, is new, and represents the integration of colonial realities into the African oral tradition.

In comparison with *Les Soleils*, Kourouma interferes less with French syntax in *Monnè*, but inserts more Malinké words into the text. These words are not always immediately explained, but their context allows the reader to approximate their meaning. Words like *monnè*, *déguè*, *sofa*, *tabala*, *tata*, *horon*, *le Kebi*, *sissa-sissa* and *lougan* remind us that this is an African story, told by an African. The presence of these Malinké words in the text can be confusing to the Western reader, but they also serve as a constant reminder of the plight of the people of Soba

who are ruled by foreigners using a foreign language. The non-African reader, like the Africans in the story, experiences a certain degree of linguistic confusion.

A rare instance in which Djigui's confusion about events is lifted occurs when Commander Héraud (a colonialist who sympathizes with the people of Soba and who has made an attempt to understand their culture and way of life) recounts the events of World War II. His words are translated by Soumaré, and interpreted and commentated by the griot, with a result that blurs the boundaries between historic fact and entertaining story:

[...] Ils se réunirent à quatre, les quatre grands parmi les cinq qui s'étaient partagé le monde. Lui, de Gaulle, chef des empires du Sud (les Arabies, les Négrities et les mers australes), Churchill, chef des empires du Nord (Londres, les Iles britanniques et tous les océans nordiques), Roosevelt, chef des empires de l'Ouest (New York, les Amériques et les océans du couchant), Staline, chef des empires du Levant (Moscou, les Russies et tous les océans orientaux). Eux, les quatre maîtres des quatre points cardinaux, jurèrent de poursuivre la guerre et de ne l'arrêter que le jour où ils auraient détruit le cinquième empire et tué Hitler, cinquième maître du monde, chef des empires du Milieu (Berlin, les Frances, les Italies et les mers du Milieu). Les quatre alliés s'en allèrent consulter le plus grand devin de l'univers qui leur dévoila les secrets de guerre du maître de Berlin, ses totems, ses faiblesses et leur recommanda des ensorcellements qu'ils pratiquèrent, des sacrifices qu'ils égorgèrent. (216)

The story continues in this vein and pleases Djigui. At last, a colonialist has achieved true communication with the people of Soba. By allowing the griot to adapt the news into a

Mandingo oral style, Héraud shows his respect for African traditions and establishes common ground with the Africans.

The novel is steeped in an ironic humor even more stinging than *Les Soleils*. Kourouma uses this dry humor to criticize traditional African society, colonial practices, and the resulting modern-day African politics. The last paragraph of the novel is particularly harsh:

La Négritie et la vie continuèrent après ce monde, ces hommes. Nous attendaient le long de notre dur chemin : les indépendances politiques, le parti unique, l'homme charismatique, le père de la nation, les *pronunciamentos* dérisoires, la révolution ; puis les autres mythes : la lutte pour l'unité nationale, pour le développement, le socialisme, la paix, l'autosuffisance alimentaire et les indépendances économiques ; et aussi le combat contre la sécheresse et la famine, la guerre à la corruption, au tribalisme, au népotisme, à la délinquance, à l'exploitation de l'homme par l'homme, salmigondis de slogans qui à force d'être galvaudés nous ont rendus sceptiques, pelés, demi-sourds, demi-aveugles, aphones, bref plus nègres que nous ne l'étions avant et avec eux. (287)

By preserving oral techniques in his novels and combining them with a sarcastic tone, Kourouma brings out all the problems that torment contemporary Africa. He affirms an African point of view while not hesitating to criticize African weaknesses. Above all, he makes clear the impact that language can have on identity. Gasster interprets the paragraph in this way: “crushed by appropriation and abused by language, the people have less and less ability to express or defend themselves” (172). The language of government not being their own, they only half understand the initiatives, becoming “demi-sourds, demi-aveugles et aphones” in their own country.

In *Monnè*, Kourouma affirms that language is inseparable from culture, from worldview, and from way of life. Communication between two languages representing such different cultures as French and Malinké is very challenging. Nevertheless, by the simple act of writing Kourouma reacts against this impossibility of mutual comprehension. His writing promotes comprehension and justifies his project of “Africanizing” the French language. By using techniques from African orality in his French-language novels, Kourouma preserves an important part of his identity and allows for its diffusion throughout the world. In *Monnè*, he constructs a literary version of recent African history, seen and retold from an African point of view.

Both *Les Soleils* and *Monnè* are works of historical fiction, and bring to life an African perspective on West African history. Writing in a postcolonial era, Kourouma is disillusioned by the lamentable results of independence from colonial powers and the rise of corrupt African leaders. His pessimistic novels are full of sarcasm directed towards French and Africans alike; he exposes problems and abuses as he sees them, sparing no one. Not to be satisfied with simply denouncing colonization, he also bitterly critiques African society before and after the colonial period.

In *Les Soleils*, the focus is on the post-independence era. The French are gone and the Africans are governing themselves, but little has changed for the ordinary people. While during colonization the economy was entirely focused on enriching the colonial power, it is now entirely focused on enriching the few elite Africans who run the new government. Fama finds himself out of the loop:

Mais alors, qu’apportèrent les Indépendances à Fama ? Rien que la carte
d’identité nationale et celle du parti unique. Elles sont les morceaux du pauvre

dans le partage et ont la sécheresse et la dureté de la chair du taureau. [...] Alors comme il ne peut pas repartir à la terre comme trop âgé, [...] il ne lui reste qu'à attendre la poignée de riz de la providence d'Allah en priant le Bienfaiteur miséricordieux. (25)

Fama, who had a privileged position in the precolonial and colonial systems, now, like so many others in the capital city, lives from one meal to the next. But he still does not accept or understand his position as one of the common people and expects special treatment.

Fama decides to return to his native village which is located on the other side of an artificial border between the “Côte des Ebènes” and the “République socialiste de Nikinai”. When the border patrol officer explains that Fama must present an identification card to cross the border, he is infuriated: “Fama étranger sur cette terre de Horodougou ! Fama le somma de se répéter. Le petit douanier [...] se répéta calmement et même parla de révolution, d'indépendance, de destitutions de chefs et de liberté. Fama éclata, injuria, hurla à ébranler tout le poste de douanes” (*Soleils* 104). Fama, legitimate prince of Horodougou, doesn't have an identification card and doesn't recognize the border that divides a unified territory. He is part of an older system in which his name is sufficient to identify himself and in which borders define the limits of a territory rather than cutting through one. Fama cannot accept this world which he terms “bâtardisé”. Kourouma uses the situation to criticize the new and random borders created by the Europeans who divided Africa amongst themselves. Based on a lack of understanding between the new system and the old prince, this incident foreshadows Fama's death which takes place at this very border crossing.

Later, when Fama has returned to the capital, he is thrown in prison without trial or explanation. After being condemned to death and having given up all hope, he is released in a

general amnesty by the paternalistic president. He finds out that the months of isolation and suffering were a result of his not recounting a dream to authorities and he was therefore accused of conspiring against the government. Through this incident, Kourouma criticizes the arbitrary and unjust dictatorial governments that became the norm in postcolonial West Africa. Their unchecked power, combined with the extreme paranoia of their leaders resulted in the imprisonment, exile, or death of many intellectuals from the region.

When Fama is released, quite ill from his long imprisonment, his only desire is to return home to Horodougou. But this time he finds the border closed to all travelers because of a dispute between the two countries. He tries to explain his desperate need to get through:

Et le dernier des Doumbouya se présenta à Vassoko, parla des limites géographiques du Horodougou, de la grandeur de sa dynastie, expliqua qu'il était malade et devait assister aux funérailles de Balla. Mais le garde s'empressa de répondre que personne ne laisserait passer Fama et que même si de leur côté ils le permettaient, ceux d'en face ne lui ouvriraient pas la porte de la république de Nikinai. (*Soleils* 198)

Fama cannot accept this refusal. In a desperate run for the border he falls into the river and is killed by the sacred alligators that live there. Fama was not able to adapt to a world where artificial borders kept him from his homeland, but he was also rejected by elements of the traditional world; the alligators that attack him represent his own totem and therefore should not have hurt him. Fama had no place in either the traditional or modern worlds.

A recurring theme of disintegration and decay in *Les Soleils* seems to reflect this negative view of society. The changes that have taken place since colonization and independence are not at all positive, not only from Fama's point of view, but the narrator's as well. The changing

world is often described as decomposing. Ouédraogo notes a recurrence of putrefaction and nausea in both novels (*Indicible* 87). In *Les Soleils* this theme is evident first in the descriptions of the capital: “Ville sale et gluante de pluies ! pourrie de pluie !” (19). The narrator mentions the wind “soufflant la puanteur” (53) and the water in the lagoon “pourrie et salée” (62). The cemetery doesn’t have enough space: “Les enterrés avaient un an pour pourrir et se reposer ; au-delà, on les exhumait” (24). Even the mosque is contaminated. When Fama arrives he encounters beggars who have gathered there: “Des mains tremblants se tendaient mais les chants nasillards, les moignons, les yeux puants, les oreilles et nez coupés, sans parler des odeurs particulières, refroidissaient le cœur de Fama” (24-5).

The decomposition is not limited to the capital, but continues as Fama travels to his childhood home of Horodougou. He finds that his village is falling apart and there hardly remains “même plus la dernière pestilence du dernier pet” (105). Fama recognizes the marketplace baobab tree only by “les vols des vautours à l’affût des charognes et des laissées des habitants se soulageant derrière les cases” (106). He arrives at his destination for the funeral of his cousin Lacina and “La cour était toute jonchée de pleureuses, assiégée par une légion de curieux et une meute de cabots, survolée par un nuage de charognards” (107). A visit to his parents’ burial site is worse. Fama’s arrival is greeted by the wind bringing with it “une puanteur insupportable” (199). Later, “Un vent plus fort souffla plus drue la puanteur. Fama se demanda ce qui pouvait tant empester le lieu” (120-21). He finally locates the cause of the stench: “Dans une pestilence à vous brûler la gorge, dans un tourbillon de mouches, gisait un chien mort, yeux et nez arrachés. Ils prièrent au pied de la tombe malgré la puanteur qui donnait comme s’ils étaient enfermés dans les boyaux” (121-22). This putrefaction and degeneration of the villages

represents the end of the traditional way of life, while the decay in the capital city reflects the author's very negative view of the postcolonial government.

In *Monnè*, which spans a longer timeframe, Kourouma broadens his critiques to include precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial African societies. Once again, the decomposition of the world is a major theme as the community undergoes drastic changes. At the start of the novel we find a static community: “La vérité était que rien n’avait été renouvelé dans le Mandingue depuis des siècles” (16). The narrator describes a society closed off to new ideas:

C’était une société castée et esclavagiste dans laquelle chacun avait de la naissance à la mort, son rang, sa place, son occupation, et tout le monde était content de son sort ; on se jalousait peu. La religion était un syncrétisme du fétichisme malinké et de l’islam. Elle donnait des explications satisfaisantes à toutes les grandes questions que les habitants pouvaient se poser et les gens n’allaient pas au-delà de ce que les marabouts, les sorciers, les devins et les féticheurs affirmaient : la communauté entière croyait à ses mensonges. (20)

This is certainly not an idyllic place. Even before the arrival of the French, the universe is troubled by cruel practices in the kingdom of Soba, and change is on the horizon. The period of French domination is characterized by more oppression and humiliation for the people of Soba while Djigui remains mostly passive. He provides the French with people to serve as workers, soldiers, cooks, and prostitutes, many of whom never return. Even the few who are allowed to remain in the villages must produce cash crops rather than food for their families. Only when Djigui visits a village which he finds completely empty and feels menaced by the zombies of his dead subjects does he begin to understand the gravity of the situation. During this “nuit de

retournement” Djigui experiences the weight of the complete *monnè* that his life has become.

The narrator recounts:

Au loin, sa ville restait dominée par son palais qui, comme sa vie, était inachevé. Djigui était défait ! avait été congédié par ses sujets. Il ne se retourna pas, c’eût été lâche. Et il n’est pas vrai qu’il pleura ; il n’avait plus une goutte de larme dans le corps. Il accomplit ce qu’il faisait quand une colère dont il ne tenait pas le responsable l’emportait. Il se mordit l’auriculaire, le mordit au sang. (125)

Djigui no longer holds the power in this changed world.

Change may have been inevitable, but society did not change for the better with the arrival of the French. The recurrence of putrefaction and nausea continues and the community quickly learns the drawbacks of any foreign authority, whether military or civilian: “le régime militaire et le régime civil étaient l’anus et la gueule de l’hyène mangeuse de charognes : ils se ressemblaient, exhalant tous les deux la même puanteur nauséabonde” (71). Descriptions of working conditions on the railroad are even more grotesque; “Sous les arbres, la chaleur moite et la puanteur des feuilles et des bêtes mortes rendent son atmosphère irrespirable. Qu’une insignifiante égratignure effleure votre peau, aussitôt la moiteur, la pourriture, la moisissure et les venins pénètrent dans votre corps et vous empoisonnent. Vous gonflez, chancelez et tombez raide mort” (80). After having seen for himself the horrible conditions into which he has been sending his people, Djigui has a terrifying dream. In an attempt to redeem himself he invites the remaining people to a large sacrifice where he will distribute food. He then passes through the crowd of miserales, distributing what comfort he can, “[Il] attoucha les plaies suppurantes des lépreux, caressa les visages purulents des aveugles, se pencha sur les grabataires, les paralytiques et les impotents en récitant des versets ésotériques” (98). But Djigui’s humiliations continue and

he is supplanted as king by his own son Béma. The narrator explains the shameful situation: “On n’appelle pas au secours quand le couteau qu’on porte à sa ceinture vous transperce la cuisse : en silence, on couvre sa plaie avec sa main. Le pus de l’abcès qui vous pousse à la gorge inévitablement vous descend dans le ventre” (129). And finally, the kingdom of Soba is completely crushed by guards who are sent in to support Béma. In each village, “L’odeur de la poudre se mêla aux puanteurs de viol et de vol” (256). What a horrible world to live in. In the course of his life, Djigui witnesses the decomposition of his world and his identity. Like Fama, he is unable to adapt and in the end succumbs to a death without honor.

The misunderstandings that are rife between the French and the Africans in *Monnè* contribute to the sad history of the people of Soba. As we saw earlier, Djigui’s entire collaboration with the French is based on a misunderstanding arising from Soumaré’s faulty translation. From this moment on Djigui is reduced to silence, while Soumaré tells the French what he thinks is best. As Soumaré explains to the people of Soba, “Je traduis les paroles d’un Blanc, d’un Toubab. Quand un toubab s’exprime, nous, Nègres, on se tait, se décoiffe, se déchausse et écoute” (*Monnè* 54). Djigui and his people are reduced to silence in the face of oppression.

The abundant translation problems between the two groups are only part of the issue. Even their interpretations of events are completely different. When the commander announces to Djigui that they are going to send a train to Soba, he understands that as a personal honor. Borgomano calls the train “le plus terrible des malentendus” (191). She cites Kourouma’s own explanation:

Il y a eu une incompréhension totale. Djigui, le roi, accepte de collaborer avec les Français parce qu’ils lui ont fait le plus grand honneur qu’on puisse faire à un

homme : offrir un train. Dans la mentalité Malinké et pour Djigui lui-même, il n’y a pas collaboration. Il cherche à se rendre digne d’un présent, d’un honneur. Pour les Français, le train doit permettre l’expansion économique d’un pays, promouvoir l’évolution des Africains. Ce n’est pas ce que Djigui voit. Il a été honoré et il doit d’abord tirer jusqu’à lui ce qui lui a été offert, montrer sa reconnaissance [...] Pour Djigui, ceux qui meurent pour la construction du train, ses sujets qui souffrent, ne meurent pas, ne souffrent pas, pour les Blancs, mais pour lui, Djigui. (cited in Borgomano 191)⁷

Only when Djigui sees the suffering of his people working under horrible conditions to build the railroad from the port in the south does he understand the tragedy to which he is contributing and renounces the train. As it turns out, the colonial engineers had already decided to modify the planned course of the railroad; the train would never reach Soba, adding to our impression of Djigui’s impotence.

Another misunderstanding of events occurs when some of the residents of Soba flee because of the drought, famine, and epidemics that overwhelm Soba during the “Renouveau”, period in which the colony is governed by the Vichy regime. Ironically, their desperate flight is misinterpreted by those who receive them into the Free French territory. The narrator explains, “Nous fûmes accueillis dans les possessions britanniques en sujets français loyaux, en résistants répondant à l’appel du 18 juin du général du Gaulle, en héros ayant, pour refuser la capitulation pétainiste, tout bravé afin de reprendre la lutte de la liberté contre le fascisme inhumain” (*Monnè* 205). Even this misunderstanding does not help the people of Soba since they are immediately conscripted into the war effort going on in Chad.

⁷ Ahmadou Kourouma “Entretien avec Ahmadou Kourouma de Yves Chemla” *Le Serpent à plumes* (8, 1993) 153.

Once independence is achieved, a disconnect between the elite and the ordinary population continues. Gyasi summarizes the lack of communication in *Monnè*:

The novel therefore not only dramatizes the incommunicability that emerges in the numerous misconceptions and misunderstandings that characterized relationships between the colonial administration and the local people in colonial times, but also underscores the lack of communication between the new African elite and the general population in postcolonial Africa. (158)

The governmental slogans do not correspond to reality. The people continue to struggle in their daily lives despite the constant parade of new initiatives. The pessimistic close to the novel emphasizes the need for true communication between government and people.

Ouédraogo concludes that in his treatment of African history, Kourouma's objective "consiste à dévoiler, à exposer sans détour les plaies de l'Afrique ancienne et contemporaine à ses enfants, et ce dans l'espoir que la seule réalisation de l'ampleur du mal suffira à guérir le patient de sa torpeur" (*Indicible* 121). It is time for a new generation of Africans to make their voices heard and speak out against injustice. Kourouma himself, in his interview with Ouédraogo insists:

Je crois qu'en tant qu'écrivain, il ne faut pas taire les dérives. Dans *Les Soleils des indépendances* tout ce que j'ai dit, maintenant se révèle et tout le monde le dit [...] Moi, je le dis parce que je ne me gêne pas. Mais, pourquoi je voudrais me tromper moi-même? [...] Il ne faut pas se gêner. Il faut s'ouvrir... Nous n'avons pas à avoir honte de ce qu'on est. On n'a plus rien à cacher. Voilà, moi je n'ai rien à cacher. J'essaie de dire tout ce que la société présente de défauts ou autres dans leurs réalités puisque les gens le savent, le vivent. (783-84)

A big step towards understanding African perspectives on history seems to be providing a truthful account of the state of African societies. In these two novels, Kourouma does so without holding back. He fills the pages with a biting sarcasm, exposing the truth behind the unjust traditional practices of the kings, the selfish collaboration with the colonists, and the corruption and ineffectiveness of modern politicians. His sarcasm is humorous, but at the same time it reveals a somber reality. Kourouma paints the world with cynicism, but through the act of writing itself, he offers hope. He believes in change and knows that only by exposing situations as they are can one begin to change them. His first two novels, *Les Soleils des Indépendances* et *Monnè, outrages et défis* expose the truth, using techniques from orality to highlight African perspectives on history and to validate African modes of understanding.

6: CONCLUSION

Through this study of ten novels we have taken a brief tour of Francophone sub-Saharan Africa. *Le Maître de la parole* and *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue* retell the story of Sunjata, 13th century leader and founder of the Mali Empire with its heartland in northeast Guinea and southwest Mali. *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba* took us to Senegal, although many of the stories can be found throughout West Africa. We remained in Senegal for *Une Si Longue Lettre* and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, but moved from the Sahel of the traditional narratives to Rama's urban life and then Salie's experiences on an isolated Atlantic island. From there we headed south to the rolling hills of Rwanda for *L'Aîné des orphelins*, then back up to Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia to follow Birahima's wanderings in *Allah n'est pas obligé*. *Johnny Chien Méchant* took us to Central Africa, to an invented country that closely resembles the Congo. In the last chapter we returned to West Africa, to Côte d'Ivoire for *Les Soleils des indépendances* and to a more general West African setting for *Monnè, outrages et défis*.

All of our novels make use of different narrative voices to express a variety of points of view regarding the history of Africa. Beginning with the griot's voice, moving through the woman's voice, the child's voice, and culminating in a multiplicity of voices, the novelists add depth to our perception of history and contribute to a broadened understanding of Africa. The novels make it clear that there is no one African voice or single African perspective. I have argued that in order to begin to understand those voices and perspectives, it is important to approach Francophone African literature with a consideration of the authors' treatment of orality,

history, and narration while at the same time contextualizing the works in order to better analyze and understand them.

Eileen Julien warns of some pitfalls when examining elements of orality found in novels by African authors. She cautions against both interpreting these elements as “quintessential signs of African identity” that enable African authors to render an alien modern form (such as the novel) authentic, and against the notion that these elements are subversive, meant to effect “the defiant postcolonial gesture” (126). She states, “Ironically, both stances amount to an investment in the notion of an essential African difference” (126). Julien points out that African novelists who do not allude to orality or incorporate indigenous languages do not therefore produce novels that are less African (130). She also reminds us that African novels are works of literature and should not be simply examined as sociological or historical documents, especially as many modern novelists are producing work that is no longer mimetic as it once was (130-131). She concludes:

The ‘French-language’ text punctuated with proverbs and tales and refashioned by the cadences of oral speech, creoles and national languages may be read more profitably, in my view, as the inscription of a dynamic reality addressed equally and fully to a range of readers who, with our varying language competencies and differences in power, inhabit one world. (132)

Julien makes several important points, and I agree with her that the novels should be examined first as literature. I also agree that the absence of elements of orality or indigenous languages does not make a novel less African. Nonetheless, I am convinced that it is significant that certain novelists have chosen to use oral elements in their novels. In contrast, Julien argues, “a text’s language is a matter of sensibility and instinct, based on feelings of identity and comfort, rather

than a matter of obligation, principle or deliberate choice” (128). Here she directly contradicts Ahmadou Kourouma’s assertions in several interviews. Kourouma stated,

Lorsque j’ai commencé à écrire *Les Soleils des indépendances*, Fama m’est apparu fade et ce n’est que lorsque je l’ai fait parler en malinké qu’il a pu avoir tout son relief. Dans les parties dialoguées le français de France ne pouvait pas convenir. (Magnier 12)

Je crois que c’est la cosmogonie africaine que je voudrais introduire dans le français pour que nous nous sentions chez nous en français. (Ouédraogo 774)

Car les idées, la matière ne suffisent pas, la forme est indispensable. L’écrivain est celui qui donne la forme qui convient à une idée. (Magnier 15)

It is evident here that Kourouma’s use of orality and language was a deliberate choice. It is a literary technique through which he and other novelists convey their messages. Perhaps the examination of orality does lead to a notion of “essential African difference”, but different does not mean unequal. People from different areas of the globe *are* different and this can be a source of pride as well as wonder. On the other hand, the differences are not so large as to prevent us from coming together in a universal expression of humanity.

And while these novels are works of literature and should be examined as such, it is not straying from the authors’ intentions to also examine the messages contained within, whether political or sociological. Many Francophone novelists make it clear that they are, as they say in French, “engagés”. They write for a purpose and wish to convey this to their readership. In his interview with Magnier, Kourouma insists:

Comment écrire dans un pays où il n’existe pas de liberté sans faire allusion à cette situation ? On passe pour un lâche, un amuseur de foire quand on parle de

tout sauf ce qui préoccupe nos lecteurs. [...] Il y a beaucoup de corruption, d'injustice sur le continent africain. Comment voulez-vous écrire sans évoquer ces problèmes ? (14)

And in his interview with Ouédraogo:

Le rôle de l'écrivain ! Je crois qu'en Afrique actuelle il y a deux choses. Il y a le fait qu'il faut démystifier l'histoire africaine, il faut que les gens en sortent. [...] Mais, il y a un autre élément qui est très, très important là-dedans. C'est que l'histoire africaine, que ce soit la littérature africaine ou la cosmogonie africaine, porte des réalités, des connaissances que certainement nous devons défendre, maintenir. C'est pourquoi je crois au point de vue technique de conter, la technique de l'écriture, la technique de l'oralité, il faut les préserver. (778)

Kourouma's use of orality and of Malinké-inflected French is certainly a deliberate and meaningful choice.

The study of Francophone African literature warrants a dedicated effort of textual interpretation because it provides not only a window into a culture about which many readers might otherwise know very little, but also reveals universal human truths. The effect of the varied narrative voices found in the ten featured novels when taken together inspires a desire for change. The individual voices combine, as it were, to form a chorus, sometimes harmonious, sometimes discordant, but always moving. The message that together they create demands that we recognize the humanity in each other. As Franz Fanon puts it, "J'ai un seul droit : celui d'exiger de l'autre un comportement humain. J'ai un seul devoir : celui de ne pas renier ma liberté au travers de mes choix" (186). In all of the novels included in this study, the authors use

elements from orality which may underscore the “African difference” but also lead us to a universal understanding of humanity.

So our tour has done more than merely expose us to a few different perspectives on African history. Each novelist used various narrative voices to draw us into their world, if only briefly, and in turn we have invited all of them into ours. These novels have the power to connect and to create connections; their readers step away with a renewed commitment to mutual assistance and dialogue throughout the world.

Finally, the novels demonstrate that Francophone literature, much like the oral performances of the past, can both entertain and inform. The novels recount serious, often tragic, situations as their protagonists undergo war, genocide, displacement, human rights abuses, colonization, imposed societal limitations, and other challenges. Yet despite the dark themes, the novels are far from dry or difficult to get through. They are above all entertaining and enjoyable, drawing their readers in through their unique and appealing narrative styles. Francophone literature, like all literature, is art and should be appreciated as such. However, the appreciation soon leads to reflection, which leads to questions, then research, and before long detailed analysis. And that is precisely how this dissertation came to be.

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