

2. The Paradox of Childhood Motif in Camara Laye's *The African Child* and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated*

By

Uchenna Bethrand Anih (PhD)

Department of Foreign Languages
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.
uchanah@oauife.edu.ng

Abstract

There is abundant evidence that Francophone African Literary writers have employed child characters in their works, offering, sometimes, contradictory representation of childhood in their works. This study attempts a comparative analysis of the representation of childhood in Camara Laye's *The African Child* and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is not obligated*. juxtaposing the paradoxical portraiture of childhood in both texts. While *The African Child* offers an idyllic and pacific African childhood and marking “the closing stages of the colonial period” (Sow 2010, 489), Kourouma's *Allah is not obligated* chronicles the gradual degeneration of childhood within the post-colony. Notwithstanding the charge of writing “misery literature” targeted mainly towards Western consumption and the humanitarian industry leveled against the author, the novel clearly demonstrates post-independence disillusionment by its portrayal of the progressive transformation of childhood innocence typified in *The African Child* to monster creatures in *Allah is not obligated*. Drawing from sociological and fictional accounts on childhood, this study underscores the gradual loss of good parenting and positive African values as well as Western materialism and values which Kourouma's text clearly depicts. The comparative analysis reveals a transition from innocence to beast as both writers clearly represent childhood from different historical periods culminating in the paradox which their novels evince. However, beyond the theme of lost childhood often popularized in Western 'humanitarian' literature, Kourouma further showcases his creative ingenuity by his employment of the unedifying character of the child-narrator to satirize the enabling African milieu.

Introduction

This paper argues that post-independence reality of the colonized African child is such a tragic one and whose literatures have birthed tragic child characters bereft of any childhood innocence. Such child characters are categorized as “de-socialized” (Kodah 2019) by considering the kind of dysfunctional sociopolitical realities within which they evolve and

operate. Thus, the emergence of child soldiering narrative also reflects the general outlook of African sociopolitical landscape.

As rightly noted by Rosen (2007) and cited by Mastey (2017) "the child soldier 'crisis' is a modern political crisis..." occasioned by postcolonial forces in Africa. Consequently, novels on child soldiering have begun to flourish within the African literary corpus in reaction to the sociopolitical realities and upheavals that have characterized the continent in the early 2000. Novels such as Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is not obliged* (2000), Chris Abani's *Song for Night*, Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* (2002), Grace Akallo's *Girl Soldier* (2007), Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, Emmanuel Jal's *War Child: A Child Soldier Story*, China Keitesti's *Child soldier* constitute an African literary corpus featuring child protagonists who contrast with the Laye's pattern of the *The African Child*. Since the publication of Camara Laye's *The African Child* (originally published in French as *L'enfant noir*) in 1953, the autobiographical novel undoubtedly occupies a classical and controversial position within the corpus of Francophone African novels of the colonial period. Though it won the prestigious literary award, Prix Charles Veillon in 1954, its reception among fellow writers of that time is marked by heavy criticism. Specifically, Mongo Beti (*Afrique noire, littérature rose*, 1955) accused Camara Laye of not being a committed writer and of course, for blissfully ignoring the "grim realities of colonialism" (Feuser, 1997:116) in Africa, especially its obvious betrayal of the emancipatory struggle for which committed African literature is known. In spite of all the shortcomings ascribed to *The African Child*, its relevance within Francophone fictional writings remains indelible as a classical text which has come to debunk most myths about Africa and Africans.

Consequently, *The African Child* has been subjects of numerous critical commentaries attesting further to its classical status within the Francophone African autobiography of the colonial period. Although, it seems impossible to exhaustively review critical works on the text, there is undoubtedly a thematic convergence and divergence focusing substantially on themes such as nostalgia (Olney, 1973); ethnography of African tradition, solidarity and individuality and collectivity (Bernard, 1978) and many more insightful criticisms on the text.

Commenting on the perceived ideological shallowness of *The African Child* as expressed by Mongo Béti and his *engagé* cohorts, Irele (2006) argues differently: [...]to overlook the ideological implication of the book at the time it was published, for implicit in Laye's story of a happy childhood in Africa, and the sense of loss of separation from his native environment that the book registers, is a refutation of the thesis of *mission civilisatrice* of the French colonial enterprise in Africa. To be sure, the counterthesis is not only overtly made, but lurks as it were within the images and evocations that make for the atmosphere of the book, colored as these are by the intense nostalgia that pervades the text from beginning to end. In other words, Laye's autobiography bears a polemical import in

the historic circumstances of its writing (115).

It can therefore be seen that the literary trajectory of the Guinean writer has witnessed several attacks among which is the attempt to also deny Camara Laye of the authorship of two of his most read literary works, *L'enfant noir* and *Le regard du roi*. Adele King (2002) in *Rereading Camara Laye* outrightly considers the Guinean novelist's literary career as false on the pretext that the author lacks both the stylistic and linguistic competence to write any of the novels. As for *L'enfant noir*, Adele shares the view that the novel was actively aided and promoted by some colonial forces in order to serve the French colonial interest. Allegations of literary fraud and non-commitment to the sociopolitical conditions of his continent shaped Laye's literary journey to the point that he was determined to write in other languages other than French, perhaps in Malinké; a feat which he never accomplished until his death in 1980. To absolve Camara Laye of any literary fraud and defend his originality, Abiola Irele (2006) further reiterates in "In Search of Camara Laye" where he describes King's allegations as merely "vague and speculative" (116). Besides, there is the need to proffer further arguments to justify the Guinean novelist's literary fraud especially as no one is yet to claim the authorship of the novel since its publication 70 years ago.

In spite of Camara Laye's controversial reputation within the Francophone African literary scene, there is no doubt *The African Child* still affords literary scholars to ponder on salient themes of decolonization, nostalgia, negritude, child protagonist amongst many other issues within African fictional writings. While it is essentialist to equate Laye's novel to an ethnographic or anthropological document detailing childhood and upbringing in Guinea, the novel affords critics/readers to savour the pacific and idyllic depiction of childhood within the African context especially, the influence of colonization on African childhood.

As noted earlier, this essay focuses on motif of childhood and how Camara Laye and Ahmadou Kourouma represent childhood in their fictional as both novels have child protagonist from whom readers extract meaning. Given the generational difference of both writers and the historical difference in the publication of the two novels, are there identifiable differences or similarities in their representation of childhood?

Arguably, contemporary post-independence Francophone African writings have witnessed child protagonists who defy universal notion of childhood in which traits such as innocence, honesty and compassion play dominant and significant roles. This is so as more recent writings within African literary corpus present emerging child protagonists who defy all logic of childhood innocence typified in Western literatures on African childhood. This argument is reechoed by Olsen (2019) that "the image of the Black child also presents a temporal contrast to white notions of innocence and purity" (85). Rather than reecho the Western racist narrative of "black is evil", Camara Laye's novel successfully idealized

African childhood absolving it of all any wrongdoings.

In contradistinction to Laye's idealization of African childhood is the emergence of African war writings in which child protagonist are represented as being violent and non-innocent. These literary works present a more frightening, damning and heartless child protagonist, victim reminiscent of the postcolonial angst whose characterization marks a paradox to the typical African child model represented in Camara Laye's *The African Child*. Though, these narratives are tagged humanitarian for their ability to arouse Western interventions, there is no gainsaying that they do, surely, offer responses to historical junctures in Africa. Apart from this, fictions devoid of child innocence as the one depicted in Kourouma's fiction also “remind us of the diversity and plurality of African childhood experiences according to societies, places, political contexts and historical moments” (Sow 2010, 499).

Between Normative and Adulterated African Childhood: Accounts from Sociology and Fiction

Studies have shown that childhood is divided into stages such as early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, preteen and teenaged before reaching adulthood (Mastey 2017). Based on this, children who constitute the major focus of our inquiry are between middle childhood and teenaged as they are well captured within the universally acceptable category of vulnerable humans deserving of nurture, care and training in order to be socially acceptable. Hallard (2022) states that children are “the means by which societies reproduce themselves biologically and culturally” (1).

While it is difficult to universalize all childhood experiences, certain characteristics of childhood are undoubtedly universal such as total vulnerability, financial dependance, immaturity, and clear physical and physiological differences from adults. Though there are “culturally specific notions of childhood” (Mastey, 2017: 41), sociological studies on children have shown that children irrespective of their culture and space share similar childhood experience which includes among others, the inability to participate in the economic life of their communities. As they grow, children undergo a natural developmental process often manifested through physical and psychological changes. Furthermore, there is a consensus among scholars that “child development is strongly influenced by family upbringing, peer groups and other environmental factors” (Mastey 2017: 40), while others have a shared a divergent views Nsamenang (1992); Trawick Smith (2010), stating quite strongly that the generally characteristics defining childhood are innate and universal.

The above debate among child development scholars negates universalizing childhood. However, many scholarly works on children contend that childhood presupposes a state of innocence and the lack of propensity for crimes. Fictional accounts

from pre-independence Francophone Africa clearly depicts innocent child protagonists who are grossly incapable of conceptualizing or committing crimes – Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy* (1956), Mongo Beti's *Mission terminée* (1957) and *Le pauvre christ de Bomba* (1956), Camara Laye's *L'enfant noir* (1953), Nafisatou Diallo's *De Tilène au plateau: Une enfance dakaroise* (1975), Cheik Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë* (1961). Though these fictional texts present classical examples of normative childhood characterized by family upbringing, peer group, environmental factors as well as colonization. The childhood portrayed in these works usually starts on an idyllic and pacific note but becomes eventually influenced by external factors beyond the protagonists. Their natural, social, emotional and psychological development process is narrativized as being disrupted by external factors such as Western education, religion and general way of life of the colonizers.

Conversely, the post-independence fiction works in Africa have represented child protagonists whose natural, social and psychological development process has been abruptly disrupted by different factors ranging from backdrops of colonization, poor or bad parenting, eventualities such as war, death of parents and among many other reasons. Consequently, child characters lose their childhood and its inherent innocence through harsh existential and environmental realities like internal conflicts and famine.

In line with the above, as recorded in both the historical and fictional narratives on war in Africa, children have been shown as arms bearers and commit despicable crimes generally associated with adults. As for fiction, Mastey (2017) claims that the child soldering discourse is subsumed into “misery literature” which ultimately engenders “sympathetic intervention” of the West. In essence, child soldering stories as demonstrated by Mastey are “generally written for, published by, marketed toward and read in the West” (40). Even if the stories appeal to and are produced for Western consumption and ultimately subsumed into Western humanitarian discourse, there is no doubt that childhood in Africa is under threat and may be jeopardized by dysfunctional sociopolitical setting often manifested through violent internal conflicts created by adults.

Against the backdrop of the general critical consensus on childhood innocence, Devine (2017) has argued that “childhood innocence is a socially constructed notion and not an axiomatic condition...” (3), suggesting therefore that children are also capable of perpetrating violent acts under certain conditions such as poor upbringing, violent family background and vengeful dispositions. In another view, most international laws categorize children as vulnerable hence, the promulgation of the *Child Rights Acts*, which establish children as prospective victims of child abuse because they constitute what Botchway (2019) calls the “peripheral subjects of the world” (p. viii). Children according to these Acts constitute a category of victimized characters rather than subjects of crimes. Hence, they are tagged aberrant or deviant children when they flout established social or moral codes of

a given society while their adult counterparts are sanctioned or punished. This is therefore not to admit that warlike situations as historicized and fictionalized in war literatures on Africa have negatively impacted on the social and moral wellbeing of children to the point of total loss, jeopardy and forfeiture of childhood innocence as depicted in most post-independence child soldering narratives.

While the focus of this study is to compare the representation of childhood in *The African Child* and *Allah is not obliged*, it must be noted that the authorial voices in both novels are not the same. Hence, Kodah's (2019) view on both novels is very apt:

“...Laye story is an adult narrator's reminiscence of his glorious upbringing as a socialized-child. In the case of Kourouma, the authorial narrator is still a child recounting his horrendous, and inglorious upbringing and life experiences as a de-socialized child” (198).

In spite of this authorial difference, both novels also represent childhood within different historical periods, thereby allowing critics examine how both writers construct childhood within their fictional works. Also noteworthy is the fact that both texts are originally written in French and both writers are of Malinké ethnic extraction. While Camara Laye hails from Guinea in West Africa, Ahmadou Kourouma is of Malinké ethnic group in Ivory Coast and their novels reflect and showcase the culture of the Malinké people. Both writers' representation of male circumcision and other Malinke customs and traditions is very poignant. Even Birahima, the authorial voice in *Allah is not obliged* alludes to the geographical spread of the Malinké people within the West African subregion:

Malinké is the name of the tribe I belong to. They 're Black Nigger African Savages and there's a lot of us in the north of Côte d'Ivoire and in Guinea, and there's even Malinkés in other corrupt fucked-up banana republics like Gambia, Sierra Leone and up in Senegal (*Allah is not obliged*, p. 11).

The Image of Childhood in *The African Child*

Camara Laye's *The African Child* is an autobiographical novel narrated from the point of view of an adult narrator with the name Laye. While in Argenteuil in France, the adult narrator reminisces about his eventful childhood in Guinea-Conakry and feels nostalgic not only about both the physical and metaphysical universe of the Malinké culture of his home country but also about the experiences of harmonious living in his traditional African societies of that time. Though an old text, *The African Child* allows readers to savour the sociocultural norms, traditions and values of the Malinké people such as their totem system, circumcision, religion, solidarity, respect for tradition, communal life before the infiltration of Western culture and values. The narrator's description of his family life offers interesting insight on patriarchy.

Laye's family exemplifies the typical normative heterosexual African family

controlled by the father, considered as the head. Laye's father, a famous blacksmith epitomizes the patriarchal figure from whom Laye is expected to draw guidance and mentorship. Laye admits this patriarchal hierarchy within his Malinké ethnic group:

“... my father, who, as the head of the family – a family of innumerable members – governed the compound, ... (*The African Child*, 13). At another instance Laye rhetorically asked “Was not my father the head man in our compound?” (17).

As with most patriarchal societies, Laye should, in the event of his father's demise, assume the position and responsibility accorded to male children. However, his emigration to the city for Western education and ultimately to France will obliterate this age-long patriarchal tradition deeply rooted among his Malinké people. While on studies, Laye gradually assimilates the French culture, paving way for the eventual loss of the knowledge of his family's guiding spirits, the black snake and ultimately, truncate his prospects as a successful blacksmith like his father.

Though enthralled by the French culture, his childhood experiences within his rural community allow readers into the undiluted reality of African childhood innocence witnessed at the closing stage of colonial rule in Guinea. Admittedly, Laye's autobiographical fiction typifies the colonial prewar childhood innocence evoked by Mastey (2016; 2017; 2018) in which the children are classified as innocent and as such are absolved of any guilt or sin because they are incapable of good or evil behaviors. While popular Western discourse portrays African children as “transgressive and fractured, as non-children “perverted from (childhood's) 'natural' course of innocence, fragility and purity (Olsen 2019, 84), Camara Laye romanticizes African children by portraying them as innocent, fragile, pure and requiring nurture and training. For this reason, even if Camara Laye is vilified for being a non-committed writer, his realist portrayal of his African childhood experience not only negates Western discourse on African childhood but also offers total contradiction to more contemporary African fictional writings and cinematic images on African children.

As a child of five or six years old, Laye evinces real traits of purity and naivety to the extent of being absolutely incapable of raising alarm against the little black snake. He naively plays with the black snake, without any fear of consequences. Even though his fingers were very close to the reptile's jaws, he remained unperturbed: “I was laughing, I had not the slightest fear, and now I know that the snake would not have hesitated much longer if, at that moment, Damany, one of the apprentices, had not come out of the workshop” (*The African Child*, p. 11). Laye's explanation further affirms the general air of childhood innocence displayed by the protagonist; an innocence that often analogous to

naivety and purity of heart, contrary to some racist discourses on African childhood.

In addition to childhood innocence as represented in Camara Laye's autobiography is the question of children's rights. As a young male child, Laye enjoys all the rights and privileges envisaged to be enjoyed by children of his age such as right to life, rights against all forms of discrimination, rights to protection and care, freedom of expressions and thoughts, and even right to education - cultural and Western. While Child's Rights were only promulgated in 1989, the social conditions described in the 1953 novel, indicate that children's rights were not, after all, Western design. The novel shows that rights of children are deeply rooted within the sociocultural fabric of the *Malinké* people and deeply engraved in their consciousness. This is attested to by the parental duties of Laye's parents towards their children as they see to it that their children are well nourished, educated and protected. It is argued here that *The African Child* attests to the universality of children's rights by its portrayal of freedom enjoyed by African children before and at least towards the closing stage of colonial rule. Therefore, within the context of African writings on childhood in Africa, *The African Child* fictionalizes children's rights as an integral, critical and important aspect of living in the continent as the novel reveals utmost respect for children's rights. The novel's opening statement affirms the recreational rights accorded to children: "I was a little boy playing round my father's hut" (p. 10). Similarly, his journey and short stay at Tindican with his maternal grandmother and uncles show the importance attached to social parenting and bonding with other family members in Africa. The protagonist recounts how he bonds with his maternal grandmother and uncles:

I often used to go and spend a few days at Tindican, a small village to the west of Kouroussa. My mother was born at Tindican, and her mother and brothers still lived there. I was always highly delighted to be going there, for they were very fond of me, and my grandmother in particular, for whom my visit was always a great treat, took great pleasure in petting me; and I for my part loved her with all my heart (p. 32).

African childhood as represented in pre-independence fictional writings show Africans as being reasonably caring of their offsprings. Though, the society depicted was in the process of being colonized, values such as hospitality, solidarity, morality, respect for elders, politeness were still common currency among the people and these were normally inculcated into children. As revealed by the protagonist, his mother ensures the sustenance of good disciplines:

My mother ... saw to it that everything was done according to her own set of rules: and those rules were strict. For example, it was forbidden to cast my gaze upon guests older than myself, [...] This was not the only rule: those concerning cleanliness were no less important. Finally, if there was a meat on the dish, I was not allowed to help myself from the centre, but only from the part directly in front of me: my father would put more within my reach if he saw that I needed it. Any other behaviour would have been frowned upon and

quickly reprimanded (56-57).

At another instance, on learning of her son's departure to France for further studies, Laye's mother resists such plans as her "child should have been permitted to grow and develop under her supervision. She expresses her fear, with the apprehension that her child is being snatched away. She tells her husband "the best thing for him is to stay here with us. Hasn't he learnt enough already ... This child will fall sick; that's what will happen. And then what will I do? What will become of me? Oh, I once had a son, but now I have a son no more! (156). The above statement shows the extent of motherly love towards her own children.

Similarly, Laye's account of his upbringing attests to the premium particularly placed on children's moral uprightness and good parenting in general. The novel subtly emphasizes good and responsible parenting, a fast-eroding value in contemporary African reality and fictions. Parenting in *The African Child* is seen as the type that allows children to grow in love and solidarity with neighbors. Laye grows up in a family setting where apprentices and family friends all contribute to the wellbeing of a child as seen in the scenario of the protagonist with the black snake. On the whole, Laye's formation within the traditional African social setting favorably disposes him as a contented and generous young man imbued with solidarity for humanity and respect for human dignity.

Even if critics dismiss *The African Child* for its apparent inability to present the African colonial experience, the novel unequivocally showcases the typical African childhood with emphasis on inculcating desired nurturing and training in children whilst emphasizing the importance of such positive African values as honesty, hard work and love to children. Though postcolonial African fictions contrast Laye's representation of childhood as we shall see in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is not obliged*.

Allah Is Not Obligated and The Paradoxical

Image of African Childhood Within The Postcolony

Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is not obliged* is best described as a satirical novel narrated from the point of view of a child-narrator and protagonist, Birahima. It is an account of his lived-experiences as a child-soldier in war-torn areas of West Africa. The novel blends history with fiction on the crisis in Sierra Leone and Liberia of 1990s by its sordid description of the horrors of war narrated from the perspective of a child soldier. The choice of a child narrator for such horrific account of war could not but be the same motivation behind the authorial voice in most novels narrated by child protagonists in *Une vie de boy*, *Le pauvre christ de Bomba* and *Mission terminée* in which the authors employ the image of a child narrator to satirize the sociopolitical landscape and, of course, denounce colonization.

As noted earlier, contemporary African imaginaries on childhood share striking

difference with older African writings in their depiction of childhood in Africa. Indeed, their orientations are different, they have nonetheless effectively “deploy child and youth protagonists to offer nuanced and revealing perspectives on contemporary nationhood” (Akpome 2018, 4) in Africa. As such, contemporary projection of the image of African childhood may not be the same as that of earlier generation of Francophone African writers. The fact that Laye was presented as a well-groomed child who enjoyed the social parenting offered by his family and cultural milieu is very poignant. As for *Allah is not obliged*, the protagonist is an uncouth, ill-mannered, illiterate and street-wise child whose utterances and demeanor defy his age:

Number three ... I'm disrespectful, I'm rude as a goat's beard like a bastard. I don't swear like the civilized Black Nigger African Natives in their nice suits, I don't say fuck! shit! bitch! I use Malinké swear words like *faforo!* (my father's cock – or your father's or somebody's father's), *gnamakodé!* (bastard), *walahé!* (I swear by Allah) (*Allah is not obliged*, p.12)

Firstly, and most importantly, Kourouma's deliberate deployment of an uncouth child character in his fiction is only a satiric effort which allows him to make salient political commentaries on the continent. Such disrespectful, rude and bold dispositions from a child allows the writer to speak frankly to the powers that-be without fear or favour. Secondly, creating a child character like Birahima is, perhaps, the writer's style of drawing attention to the progressive degeneration of African value system and its effect on childhood and the future of the nation. After all, the task of the writer as suggested by Achebe (1970) is to use his art in the reeducation of his people. Birahima's image and experiences as a child call attention to the imminent danger such children may pose to collective survival in Africa on attainment of adulthood.

In essence, Kourouma's *Allah is not obliged* showcases the transition of African childhood from innocence to beast as the child character and all his colleagues defy all sense of childhood innocence vividly manifested in *The African Child*. In spite of similar Malinké culture exhibited in both novels, Kourouma's portrayal of the African childhood debunks the idealized childhood innocence portrayed in *The African Child*. Birahima is neither innocent nor naïve as he exhibits clear traits of lost childhood which is often manifested through the loss of innocence as result of the general sociopolitical circumstances, which are at variance with proper upbringing for which traditional African milieu is noted. Even though Mastey (2017) is of the view that childhood innocence is a socially constructed notion (4), and that most narratives on the child soldiering employ a sensationalized imagery of lost innocence in order to elicit pity from the Western audience. Mastey (2017) further proves that “Childhood innocence is a pre-condition in child soldiering narratives regardless of how they are generally categorized” (4). As such, most literary works on the child soldiering evade textual references to prewar innocence and

when they do, they are usually referential rather than being explicit. As true as this assertion appears, the idea of childhood innocence is not a new phenomenon in African fictional writings as has been shown in this essay on *The African Child*.

Birahima is a total contrast to child protagonist in *The African Child* because his language and demeanor reveal that he lacks the basic formation required of a boy of his age. Though his age is unknown, which he doubts to be between 8 and 12 years according to his mother and grandmother's account of his actual age: "I'm maybe ten, maybe twelve (two years ago, grandmother said I was eight, maman said I was ten (*Allah is not obliged*, p. 12). Also, whilst he admits that his juvenile position in his fourth introductory statement, he still appears to bother about his uncouth and disrespectful actions by offering an apology: "... I suppose I should apologise for talking right at you like this, on account of how I'm only a kid" (chapter 1). Such apology from an illiterate child character who describes himself as being fearless and blameless before his enlistment in the rebel force is only but ironic. It further shows that he is conscious of what polite and respectful behaviors are, yet he is unable to demonstrate them. He blames his impolite manner on the war in Liberia:

Polite kids are supposed to listen, they don't sit under that talking tree and they don't chatter like a myna bird in a fig tree... There's a proverb that says, 'For as long as there's a head on your shoulders, you don't put your headdress on your knee'. That's village custom for you. But I don't give two fucks about village customs, 'cos I've been in Liberia and killed lots of guys with an AK-47 (we called it a 'Kalash') and got fucked up on kanif and lots of hard drugs (Chapter 1)

Undoubtedly, Birahima lacks basic home training which could have been offered by both parents – father and mother. He reveals that his father died when he was still a toddler and his mother who could have given him the much-needed home training, as done by Laye's mother in *The Africa Child*, was suffering from ill health. In fact, he describes this deficit as major and extremely important:

I forgot to tell you something major, something extremely important. Maman walked round on her arse. *Walahé!* On the cheeks of her arse. She propped herself up on her hands and her left leg. Her left leg was withered as a shepherd's crook and her right leg – the one she called her crushed serpent's head – was amputated and crippled by the ulcer (Chapter 1).

There is no doubt that Birahima's mother's disability contributed greatly to his behavioural deficit even though he was made to believe that his mother's non-healing ulcer was as a result of her evil deeds. This false idea triggered his hatred for his mother and his choice of street life:

When I found out about all this stuff, when I found out that my mother was a devourer of souls and was even devouring her own rotting leg. I was astonished, so sickened, that I cried. [...] On the morning of the fifth day, I left maman's hut forever...

That's when I became a street kid. A proper street kid that sleeps with the goats, and nicks stuff to eat from fields and concessions (23).

Above all, Birahima was not well taken care of as a child because of his mother's health and the premature death of his father. He stated categorically that he was a street kid even before enlisting as a child soldier in Liberia: "Before I got to Liberia, I was a fearless, blameless kid. I slept everywhere I wanted and stole all kinds of stuff to eat. My grandmother used to spend days and days looking for me: that's because I was what they call a street kid" (Chapter 1).

From the above, it is clear that postcolonial African childhood is gradually under threat as children within contemporary times as evidenced in the novel lack the basic experience of home which is supposed to be their first point of socialization. Thus, by inference, Birahima, just like most children of the post-independence period, is compelled to vagrancy either by choice or by circumstances beyond his control. Such circumstances are those occasioned by existential conditions of the post-independence period such as hunger, war, poverty, disease and so on. Indeed, the prevailing conditions (social, economic and political) in Kourouma's novel are not the same as those depicted in *The African Child*.

By artistically engaging the social realities of post-independence through his representation of civil war in Sierra Leone and Liberia, Kourouma draws attention to materialistic, corrupted and decadent society in which children of the post-independence era are raised. Africans, as portrayed in the novel, are principally driven by greed and economic survival to the extent of employing children as soldiers for selfish purposes. Kourouma highlights this change in societal values in his novel by presenting different kinds of occupations that have begun to manifest and flourish in the wake of independence – marabou, fortune teller, money multiplier, rebel warlords and the likes.

Similarly, to 'wet beards' is a frequently used expression employed to satirize the enabling milieu. Birahima offers an explanation to this satirical expression: "By wetting the beards (that means bribing people, also known as paying *baksheesh*), by wetting the beards of the customs officers, Yacouba's cola nuts got in the boat in Abidjan and off the boat in Dakar without paying a penny in taxes or duties" (*Allah is not obliged*, 31). Kodah (2019) succinctly describes the society in which evolves Birahima and many other child soldiers in the novel: "Birahima is a product of dysfunctional society marked by broken-home, juvenile delinquency, unreliable system of education, irrational religious practices, civil strife, drug addiction, senseless homicide, corruption, sexual violence and child abuse" (213).

Finally, though Birahima's actions may not actually represent the writer, there is clear evidence however that Kourouma, through the child narrator, throws up germane issues which are very relevant to the enabling African society. For instance, Birahima asserts, in his self-introduction, the worthlessness of academic degrees in corruption-

infested milieux:

Education isn't worth a grandmother's fart any more, because nowadays even if you get a degree, you've got no hope of becoming a nurse or a teacher in some fucked-up French speaking Banana republic. ('Banana republic means it looks democratic, but really it's all corruption and vested interests (Chapter 1). The above underscores the choice of Birahima as the authorial voice through whom Kourouma satirizes his enabling African milieu. It becomes clearer that even beyond the general change observed in children of the colonial period as evidenced in *The African Child* and those of the post-independence era as seen in *Allah is not obliged*, the choice of a fearless and uncouth Birahima as the mouthpiece of Kourouma truly suggests the satirical nature of the text.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that there is a transition from innocence to the beast in the representation of childhood in the two novels. While Camara Laye portrays childhood as a period of complete innocence, Kourouma's image of childhood is highly terrifying as *Allah is not obliged* presents children as blood-thirsty, ill-mannered and violent creatures. The explanation for such change is to be found in the general sociopolitical conditions which shape the post-independence and the lack of responsible parenting in contemporary times. *The African Child* epitomizes the ideal African child whose existential conditions reflect the important value placed on children and parenting within most African milieux of precolonial and colonial period. The image of the child within *Allah is not obliged* clearly mirrors the postcolonial angst and a dysfunctional society in which there is a lack of sympathy for vulnerable children and respect for the rights of children.

Both Camara Laye and Ahmadou Kourouma show concern to the plight of African children in their fictional works. Even if Camara Laye is reproached for his non-commitment to the anti-colonial cause, *The African Child* remains a classical text for its idyllic description of African childhood as it clearly shows roles played by parents, family friends and the society at large in raising socialized adults. In contrast to Camara Laye's novel, *Allah is not obliged* dramatizes the consequences of the failure of such parental and societal obligations. As shown in the novel, economic exigencies, greed, chaotic upbringing also contribute to the child narrator's descent into terror.

Indeed, both writers (Laye and Kourouma) represent childhood from different historical periods culminating in the paradox which their novels evince. However, beyond the mutation from innocence to beast and the metaphor of "Coming of age with an AK – 47" alluded to by Walsh (2008), Kourouma showcases his creative ingenuity by employing the unedifying character of the child-narrator to satirize the enabling African milieux. This essay therefore affirms the paradoxical in reading the two texts as far as their portraiture of childhood is concerned. This ultimately shows a sense of counterbalance through the

juxtaposition of the childhood motif elaborated in this study.

References

- Achebe, Chinua. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Garden City NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1976
- Akpome, Aghogho. "Child and Youth Protagonists in Habila's *Measuring Time* and Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*" *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, 55.2 (2018): 4-20.
- Bernard, R. Paul. "Individuality and Collectivity" A Duality in Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir*" *The French Review*, 52.2 (1978): 313-324.
- Béti, Mongo. "Afrique noire, littérature rose" *Présence Africaine* 1&2 (1955) : 133-145. Devine,
- Feuser, Willfried. "Literary Representations of Childhood and Youth in Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone and Germanophone African Literature" *Présence Africaine*, 155 (1997):100-122.
- Irele, Abiola. "In Search of Camara Laye" *Research in African Literatures*, 37.1 (2006):110-127.
- King, Adele. *Rereading Camara Laye*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002.
- Kodah, Mawuloe Koffi. "Mending the Broken Fence: A Study of the Socialized and De-socialized Child in Laye's *The African Child* and Kourouma's *Allah is not obliged*" *New Perspectives on African Childhood: Constructions, Histories, Representations and Understandings*. Ed. Botchway et al, Delaware/Malaga: Vernon Press, (2019):197-216.
- Kourouma, Ahmadou. *Allah is not Obligated*. Translated by E. Wynne. London: Vintage Books, 2006.
- Laye, Camara. *The African Child*. Translated by James Kirkup. London: Collins, 1959.
- Mackey, Allison. "Troubling Humanitarian Consumption: Reframing Relationality in African Child Soldier Narratives" *Research in African Literatures*, 44.4 (2013): 99-122.
- Mastey, David. "Child Soldier Stories and Their Fictions" *Interventions*, 18.1(2016): 143-158.
- . "The Adulterated Children of Child Soldier Narratives" *Research in African Literatures*. 48.4(2017): 39-55.
- . "Child Soldier Narratives and the Humanitarian Industry" *Genre*, 51.1 (2018): 81-103.
- . "Child Soldier Narratives and Their War Names" *English Studies*, 99.2 (2018): 166-182.
- . "The Relative Innocence of Child Soldiers" *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 54.3 (2017): 1-16.
- Olney, James. *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973.

Olson, Debbie. "On the Innocence of Beasts: African Child Soldiers in Cary Fukunaga's *Beasts of No Nation*" *New Perspectives on African Childhood: Constructions, Histories, Representations and Understandings*. Ed. Botchway et al, Delaware/Malaga: Vernon Press, (2019): 83-108.

Rosen, DM. "Child Soldiers, International Humanitarian Law, and the Globalization of Childhood" *American Anthropologist*, 109.2 (2007): 296-306.

Sow, Alioune. "Political Intuition and African Autobiographies of Childhood". *Biography*, 33.3 (2010): 498-517.

Walsh, John. "Coming of Age with an AK-47: Ahmadou Kourouma's "Allah n'est pas obligé" *Research in African Literatures*, 39.1 (2008): 185-197.