

“Walahé!”; “You should have seen it”: Validating the Truth of Wartime Absurdities in Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah is Not Obligated*¹

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Abstract

Ahmadou Kourouma’s Allah is Not Obligated is a fiction based on the civil wars in the West African countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone as a result of the breakdown of democracy. It employs the point of view of a child narrator, Birahima, a literalist picaro, to narrate wartime atrocities. The novel, mainly a satire, employs the devices of irony and humour that allow Birahima to present his world, which is turned upside down, and morality, reversed, in a way that makes the reader laugh in spite of the horror. The reality of Birahima’s wartime experience, which has left him in a kind of developmental “limbo”, is difficult to believe to be true. However, he makes every effort in his use of language to prove the truthfulness of the absurdity he narrates. This paper considers how the protagonist/narrator Birahima’s entry into war leaves him in an absurd, cyclical limbo while he resorts in frustration to validate his absurd experience through appealing to God, folk wisdom and dictionaries.

Keywords: Ahmadou Kourouma. Absurd. Child soldier. Satire. Allah is Not Obligated.

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Introduction

In the Petit Robert it says ‘re-education’ means the act of re-educating, in other words ‘re-education’.
Walahé! Even the Petit Robert sometimes takes the piss.
Kourouma, 2011, p. 64

In Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah is Not Obligated*, we are presented with a ten-year-old child soldier who narrates the horrors he experiences at the battlefield. His experiences are unbelievable, but he tries his best to validate the truthfulness of his story by appealing to God, *walahé* (I swear by Allah), as the guarantor of all truth, to the wisdom in folk culture, and, curiously, to dictionaries, which constitute his final proof. He has a regular swear word, *faforo* (a father’s cock), which he uses after narrating every horrific incident to vouch for the truthfulness of the story he narrates. He also has in his possession four dictionaries that he uses to try to explain words as literally as possible for his readers both to understand and to vouch for the truth of what he says. The dictionaries are: the *Larousse* and the *Petit Robert* for looking up, checking and explaining French words; the *Glossary of French Lexical Particularities in Black Africa* for explaining African words; and the *Harrap’s* for explaining pidgin words. (All these dictionaries actually exist, except for one.) However, even with all the tools available to him to validate the truthfulness of his story, he gets frustrated because his experience is so absurd that the more he tries to prove that it is the truth, the more absurd it becomes.

This paper argues that *Allah is Not Obligated* is about validating the child’s wartime experience using folk wisdom, religion, and the philosophy represented by the dictionary of literal validation based upon definition and classification, most strongly linked with European enlightenment systematisation of reason, highlighted similarly by the project of the French *Encyclopédistes*. As is suggested by Joseph Minga, “Kourouma’s Birahima moves through the forests in quest of truth about wars, a truth which Africa without doubt needs, and out of which is born deception, and less hope” (MINGA, 2012, p. 235).

Allah is Not Obligated is a novel that fictionalises the breakdown in democracy and its attendant wars in a part of West Africa. It employs the point of view of Birahima, a literalist picaro, who hides behind well-constructed masks of polemic to chronicle war atrocities that he is unwilling to face up to and is incapable of confronting. The novel is set in the West African countries of Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. The narrative begins when, after his mother's death, Birahima is entrusted into the care of a false Muslim, a self-proclaimed sorcerer or *grigriman* (magician) called Yacouba, who claims to know where in Liberia Birahima's Aunt, Mahan, lives and promises to take him to her. Before they leave, Yacouba prepares the boy's mind in terms of what to expect in Liberia and promises to take him to a place where children are made into soldiers and given a lot of money, which makes Birahima eager to become a "small soldier", as the novel refers to the child soldier. Crossing the border into Liberia, they are arrested by a rebel force at a roadblock. After child soldiers stop them and other passengers, since child soldiers are used as "border" guards, they are robbed on the grounds that one of the passengers killed a child soldier named Captain Kid. Without being forced into military service, Birahima willingly offers to become a small soldier, while Yacouba offers himself as a *grigriman* in order to survive. Birahima thus becomes a child soldier in NPFL military faction, under the rebel ruler Colonel Papa Le Bon.

At Papa Le Bon's camp, Birahima experiences and witnesses horrific experiences that are so unbelievable that he has to swear by God and appeal to dictionaries to vouch for the truthfulness of the horror he narrates. Papa Le Bon uses child soldiers to mount roadblocks so that they can loot passengers and bring the spoils to him. Birahima recounts Papa Le Bon's hypocrisy, captured in the irony of his name, which means "good father". He has a guest house where he performs ritual magic for women, which is just a ruse for sexual exploitation: "Some people said during the rituals, Colonel Papa Le Bon took off his clothes and so did the women. *Walahé*" (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 65). Here, Birahima swears "*walahé*" because what he is saying is unbelievable, but it is the truth, so he swears to prove its truthfulness. Birahima also says Papa Le Bon has

different categories of prisoners, including the husbands of women that he “has decided to love” (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 64). After working as a child soldier for Papa Le Bon for some time, Birahima is influenced by another child soldier, Tête Brûlée, who had already served as a child soldier in the ULIMO military faction, to rebel against Papa Le Bon because he is not looking after them well. Tête Brûlée succeeds in killing Papa Le Bon and takes weapons and a group of child soldiers back to ULIMO, a faction led by a woman soldier named Générale Onika Baclay.

As part of the ULIMO faction, Birahima again experiences and witnesses many horrific incidents. General Onika uses the child soldiers to mount attacks where many child soldiers die, but she wildly rejoices over her victories in spite of the number of young human lives lost. The sight of the dead in Onika’s camp is so overwhelming that, to Birahima, one could only believe if one had witnessed the atrocity: “You should have seen it! It was a terrible sight. There were corpses everywhere, soldiers and child soldiers dead, safes empty and two bossmen missing” (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 107). The number of deaths of child soldiers is so unbelievable that Birahima thinks he has to swear by God before anybody would believe it. For instance, during an attack on Onika’s camp, he narrates that there “was lots of furious gunfire and consequences: bodies, lots of dead bodies. *Walahé!* Five child soldiers and three real soldiers got massacred” (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 106).

After Onika’s defeat, Birahima and Yacouba, his “guardian”, head for the south since “[t]hat’s the way [his] aunt went” (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 124). After walking for a few hours, they come to a camp controlled by Prince Johnson, one of the important warlords in Liberia, who receives Yacouba as a *grigriman* and Birahima as a child soldier. Birahima’s stay at Johnson’s camp enables him to recount some of the worst atrocities of the war. Johnson is revealed as a ruthless warlord who will do anything, no matter how cruel, in order to get money for his exploits, but loudly proclaims to be fighting under the instruction of God to kill the devil’s children. At Johnson’s camp, Birahima witnesses even worse atrocities of the war, chief among them being the torture and killing of Samuel Doe, the dictator of Liberia, by Prince Johnson.

True to the picaresque nature of the narrative, Birahima and Yacouba again leave Johnson's camp based on the news that Mahan has fled Liberia in search of her brother in Sierra Leone. In Sierra Leone, Birahima and Yacouba are captured by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) freedom fighters under General Tieffi at a town called Mile-Thirty-Eight. Here too, Yacouba joins the *grigrimen* while Birahima joins the child soldiers. At the RUF camp, Birahima wants to join the young lycaons, a special unit of child soldiers who are given the most inhuman jobs, but he is disqualified because he has no living parents to kill in order to qualify. Birahima and Yacouba leave the RUF camp after the Kamajors, the association of traditional hunters, take over Mile-Thirty-Eight. They hear that Mahan is at a refugee camp at Worosso but they arrive too late when she is already dead. Thus, even the quest in the narrative is as futile as the attempt to validate the truth of the implausibility of the child soldier experience. Returning to Côte d'Ivoire in his cousin Dr. Mamadou Doumbia's car after visiting the mass grave where his aunt's body was deposited, Mamadou asks Birahima to tell him about his experiences of war. His cousin, Dr. Mamadou, also gives him the four dictionaries he has acquired from Varrassouba Diabate, the traditional griot who also acted as translator and has died. The semi-literate Birahima demands that his oral story be noted in writing by his cousin, in an attempt to give his unbelievable tale a permanence that will survive time. In these ways, the novel makes a break with the significance of the oral tradition that may be able to represent and allow the history of the child soldier to endure. But it also sends up and undermines the literate culture it enters since at the end the narrative returns to the beginning word for word in its repetition of the stuck cycle of Birahima's "bullshit" story that dramatises the stuck cycle of his personal development.

Thus, Birahima's search for his Aunt Mahan takes him through the camps of various warlords that are versions of the same horror, which enables him to give an account of what happens at the camps of the warring factions. The construction of the novel around the quest allows Birahima to report the atrocities of the war that are so absurd that, in fact, the imperative of the narrative is the validation of the truth of the account. Birahima seeks different ways to prove that his

absurd story is real. As noted above, he appeals to God as the ultimate guarantor of truth, to the truth that resides in folk wisdom, and most significantly, since it is the most emphatic, he appeals to the truth that resides in the authority of print culture with its specific logic and systems of classification. The centrality of the appeals to the forms of truth of the culture represented by the dictionaries is apparent from the fact that words are defined from the dictionaries two to three times in the novel, while the appeals to God and folk wisdom are slowly abandoned. But, paradoxically, the more Birahima tries to be truthful, the more absurd his story becomes.

Finding Meaning in a Life: Birahima’s Paradoxes of the Absurd

The word “absurd” as an adjective is associated with a sense of disharmony, of being out of tune, the idea of the irrational, lack of purpose or even silly, and this is exactly the sense taken in absurdist fiction. In a philosophical context, the idea of the absurd was explored by Albert Camus in 1942 through the figure of Sisyphus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus is represented as a paradoxical, double-natured archetype of profound boredom, whose contempt of the gods, hatred of death, and passion for life won him an unspeakable penalty in which his whole life is exerted toward achieving nothing. The artistic development of the concept of the absurd is an illustration of how an idea of philosophical scepticism was transferred and reworked in and through the realms of literature. The latter, in turn, seems to provide thought with a mode of language in which the unspeakable nothingness, paradoxically enough, may be communicated (RINH AUG, 2008, p. 42). The Literature of the Absurd originates with the Theatre of the Absurd which followed the first and second world wars as a result of disillusionment with the rationalism, which attempted to justify the exploitation of the working class and poor, the affluence of the rich, the cruel yet overlooked destructiveness of the two world wars, and the unquestioned belief in evolution and progress.

The Literature of the Absurd attempts to paint a ludicrous caricature of our world as a world without faith, meaning, direction or freedom. Human life is more and more removed

from the natural world, and human beings are alienated from the earth and each other. Human behaviour is more conditioned and psychologically manipulated so that it is no longer governed by logic or the rational. This meaninglessness and hopelessness of life are depicted in the incoherent, often chaotic structure of the works of absurdist literature. Nothing is chronological, and nothing follows from that which went before. The Literature of the Absurd portrays the world as an unintelligible place.

Absurdist literature defies the traditional conventions of literature and reflects the changes in mankind's philosophical perception of our place in the universe. Traditional literature is based on the convention that life has meaning, a goal and order or structure. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle laid down the guidelines for the order and structure of literature. Realist literature tends to reinforce this by being coherent, linear in structure and aiming for order and unity. The absurd, on the other hand, as that which has no meaning, purpose or goal, does not follow standard structure or order. There are distortions in both time and place. Nothing about this genre is standard as the "moral" of the story is not explicit. The author often rejects standard morality completely and the structure of stories differs from traditional story structure. Thus, writers have great freedom to create unique works of art.

Linked to the distorted structure in the absurd is the portrayal of language as that which has failed to say what needs to be said. The absurd thus "poses a serious rhetorical challenge. A man has at his disposal only words, yet his experience tells him that these poor tokens of reason cannot say what needs to be said. ... The writer tries to say what is fundamentally unsayable. In the process, language 'goes on holiday'" (HALLORAN, 1973, p. 98). One possible response to the view that language cannot say what needs to be said is to retreat into silence and fall back on purely visual means of communication like movement, gesture, and visual metaphor, as some of the absurdist did as a means of articulating their experiences. "The language that does appear in the Theatre of the Absurd is often a language that has become disengaged from reality. Language is used to satirise language, to show the hopelessness of using language to deal with serious human problems. In the process, words are liberated from the rules that are supposed to govern their

use and keep them firmly attached to reality, and the spirit of pure play takes over. Language satire becomes verbal farce” (HALLORAN, 1973, p. 99).

Some of the common elements in absurdist fiction are satire, dark humour, incongruity, the elimination of reason, and argument regarding the philosophical condition of being “nothing”. A great deal of absurdist fiction is humorous or irrational in nature, but the hallmark of the genre is neither comedy nor nonsense. Rather, it is the study of human behaviour under circumstances, whether realistic or fantastical, that appear to be meaningless. Absurdist fiction proposes little judgment about characters or their actions as that task is left to the reader. Also, the “moral” of the story is generally not explicit, and the themes or characters’ realisations are often ambiguous in nature.

In *Allah is Not Obligated*, the absurd exists at the level of subject matter but does not create anti-style. The style of representation is not absurd, rather, the situation being narrated is what is absurd. In the rest of the section, I trace Kourouma’s unique formula of representing children in war situations which is at once realistic and absurd. I argue that the reality Kourouma portrays has many of the characteristic features of the absurdist tradition, though from an African perspective. The novel portrays the life of human beings in war situations as one without any logical explanation for what happens. Children who are supposed to be in schools are enlisted in the armies of various warring factions as child soldiers fighting in wars whose causes they do not even know. Religion is presented as a set of hollow rituals. Morality is portrayed as downgraded, as parents have become irresponsible, leading their children to become street children, truants, and liars. Birahima, the protagonist, is already a school drop-out before he is recruited as a child soldier. The activities of international organisations and regional peacekeeping agencies like the UN, IMF, ECOWAS, and ECOMOG do not benefit anybody.

The reality the novel represents is absurd since there is a form of moral frustration and lack of correspondence between the mind’s need for coherence and the incoherence the mind experiences. The reality portrayed is difficult to be synthesised by the mind because the world presented has lost touch with all known realities. Childhood no longer signifies innocence but

rather the status of childhood is linked with being a soldier and a killer. Children have become “bastards, druggies, criminals and liars. They were cursed” (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 144). Instead of being given formal education, children are taught how to shoot, loot and smoke hash on the battlefield. They are given AK-47s and drugs which makes them insensitive in carrying out any gruesome act. Even though Birahima is corrupted before he becomes a child soldier, his situation is made worse by his experience as a child soldier. He does not “give a shit about modesty” (*ibid.*, p. 50). His situation is worsened by the war after which he says he does not care about village customs because he killed a lot of people under the influence of drugs. This shows a child who is so spoilt that it is difficult to explain the extent of damage caused to his life by the war experience which portrays the absurdity of his situation. Birahima narrates how child soldiers line up at Captain Kid’s funeral and fire their kalashes: “That is all they’re good at. Firing guns” (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 59). “That’s all the child soldiers do, they just shoot and shoot” (*ibid.*, p. 106). Children are also initiated into special groups such as the young lycaeons and made to engage in acts which are unthinkable. They are made to kill one of their parents and eat human flesh, as it has been mentioned above.

The characters of the religious practitioners who are the symbol of immorality and hypocrisy also present a level of absurdity in the novel. The novel represents religion as nothing but hollow rituals. Nuns, instead of being the virginal brides of God, like all other women, “made love” (*ibid.*, p. 74). Papa Le Bon, a priest, officiates funeral vigils with “his colonel’s stripes, his *grigris* under his clothes, his kalash and the papal staff” (*ibid.*, p. 74), and, when he sits to settle cases, he wears “his soutane with all the medals, with the Bible and his Qur’an on hand” (*ibid.*, p. 75). In some ways, Papa Le Bon is an African reincarnation of Alfred Jarry’s Ubu in *Ubu Roi*. The biblical commandment against stealing is also twisted to suit people’s personal interest: “Pilfering food isn’t stealing because Allah, Allah in his inordinate goodness, never intended to leave empty for two whole days a mouth he created. *Walahé!*” (*ibid.*, p. 129). Similarly, the precepts of religion are turned on their head in the absurd postcolonial African context:

He, Prince Johnson, was a man of the Church, a man who had become involved in tribal wars at God’s command. God had commanded that he, Prince Johnson, wage tribal war. Wage tribal war to kill the devil’s men. The devil’s men who had so gravely wronged the people of Liberia (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 131).

Johnson commits numerous gruesome acts in the name of Christianity, as does Mother Superior Marie Beatrice, another of the religious figures whose portrayal is absurd. She is a saint “who made love like every woman in the universe” (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 134). She is “a saint with a cornet and an AK-47!” (*ibid.*, p. 137). When enemies come to her convent, she machine-guns them herself: “She machine-gunned hard and long and relentlessly and inflicted heavy losses on the attackers” (*ibid.*, p. 145). Another female figure in the novel is also satirised: “Sister Hadja Gabriel Aminata was one-third Muslim, one-third Catholic and one-third Animist. She was a colonel on account of she had lots of experience with young girls because over twenty years she’d excised nearly a thousand girls” (*ibid.*, p. 180). She wears hajj dress and “carrie[s] her kalash under the frills of her skirt” (*ibid.*, p. 182). The portrayal of religious representatives is thus a source of absurdism in the novel.

The character of Yacouba, the symbol of corruption in the name of religion, presents yet another deeper level of absurdity provoked by the feeling of uncertainty and the belief in superstition. While people are dying in the war, he takes advantage of the superstitious beliefs of the people and presents himself to various warlords as being able to produce protective amulets (*grigris*) which can make them win their battles without any casualties on their side. The novel portrays Yacouba as nothing but a businessman who takes advantage of the ancient beliefs of his people and who makes money by exploiting the warriors’ gullibility. While people are dying, Yacouba lives well as a sorcerer. He decorates himself with fetishes, like green fangs, to impress people around him who will employ him so he can make money. He is satirised as taking advantage of the war to become rich in gold and diamonds, which he has stored in his underpants, making him “look like he had massive hernia. That’s how many purses he had round his waist and the fold of his trousers” (KOUROUMA, 2011, p.

187-188). The characterisation of Yacouba also contributes to the absurd in the novel.

As mentioned earlier, morality is portrayed as downgraded, as parents have become irresponsible, leading their children to become street children, truants, and liars. Birahima, the protagonist, is already a school drop-out before he is recruited as a child soldier. His father dies early, leaving him with a sick mother and an aged grandmother. When his mother is branded a witch and accused of devouring her own ulcer at night, Birahima abandons her, leaves home and becomes a street child. Having rejected his mother, who dies with pain, Birahima sees himself as cursed. This is an indication of a child who has already resigned to a destiny that is imposed on him, making him have a low estimation of himself. Unlike My Luck in Chris Abani's *Song for Night* and Mene in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*, Birahima does not even ask any questions. He just comforts himself with his regular comment which echoes the full version of the title of the novel, "Allah is not Obligated to be fair about all that he does here on earth", and his other swear words, "Walahé", "Faforo" and "Gnamokodé". Most of the child soldiers also have their education disrupted before they enter the war as child soldiers. These children's deprivation, among other things, is as a result of bad parenting, poverty and irresponsible teacher behaviour, while some children become orphans as a result of war. The irresponsibility of both parents and children is so horrific that narration of it is nothing but absurd.

The activities of international organisations and regional peacekeeping agencies like the UN, IMF, ECOWAS, and ECOMOG are portrayed as meaningless and farcical since they fail to live up to expectation. ECOWAS, in resolving the crisis in Sierra Leone, calls for more sanctions when Sierra Leone is starving without fuel and food. ECOMOG continues bombing raids that are even more damaging than the war itself. The strict patrolling of territorial waters makes it impossible for boats, trawlers, and fishing boats to ply their trade. ECOMOG troops who are deployed to save the people "were shelling the whole fucking mess" so indiscriminately that it led to another coup d'état, "the bloodiest - in the history of Sierra Leone, a

fucked-up country that had seen lots of coups” (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 191). This shows the inefficiency of these international bodies. That is why Birahima says ECOMOG is referred to as “the peacekeeping forces who never keep the peace” (*ibid.*, p. 176). Kourouma condemns ECOMOG’s unreliability in the way he portrays them as acting too late and killing innocent victims. For instance, Johnson’s attack of the gold and diamond mines controlled by the ULIMO is said to have “lasted so many days that there was even time to alert the ECOMOG peacekeeping forces and there was even time for them to get there” (*ibid.*, p. 139). This shows that they always arrived late and, when they arrived at the battlefield, they were not effective, “they fired shells at the people attacking and the people being attacked” (*ibid.*, p. 141). The absurdity of ECOMOG’s activities is also seen in the way they bomb innocent victims and, in a single day, “produced loads of innocent victims than a whole week of rival factions just fighting with each other” (*ibid.*, p. 139). No wonder Birahima defines Humanitarian Peacekeeping as “when one country is allowed to send soldiers into another country to kill innocent victims in their own country, in their own villages, in their own huts, sitting on their own mats” (*ibid.*, p. 126) and UN’s negotiations in times of war as “a change to the changes that doesn’t change anything” or “a huge change to the changes that amount to no change at all” (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 171).

The absurdity of the war represented in the novel is enacted through upside-down definitions where words and ideas come to mean their opposite. The case of the peacekeeping forces who destroy the peace has already been referred to above. Similarly, women’s rights are defined as follows: “[t]he woman is always wrong. That’s what they call women’s rights” (*ibid.*, p. 26). Also, human rights violations are presented as morally right: “Torture is corporal punishment that is enforced by justice” (*ibid.*, p. 133). But perhaps most to the point is the inversion of the concept of childhood in the novel where the child, at the start of life, achieves greatness through death, inverting the natural progression of the human being in all cultures across history. Birahima explains about the eulogies he presents for fallen comrades in arms:

funeral oration is a speech in honour of a famous celebrity who’s dead. Child soldiers are the most famous celebrities of the late twentieth century so whenever a child soldier

dies, we must say a funeral oration. That means we have to recount how in this great fucked up world they became a child soldier (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 83).

All these upside-down definitions underscore Birahima's world as irrational and absurd.

The novel, even though it portrays a hopeless situation, does so through irony, hyperbole, and excessive humour. Horrific and serious events are narrated through excessive humour. For instance, when the vehicle in which Birahima and Yacouba are travelling to Liberia is attacked by child soldiers, the passengers who are not killed are stripped naked. The child soldiers subsequently report to Papa Le Bon that they killed some of the passengers, "but seeing as God says thou shalt not kill too much or at least thou shalt kill less, we stopped killing and left the others just the way they came to the world. We left them naked" (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 57). People's poor conducts are also made to appear funny. For instance, the father of Sosso, one of the child soldiers, is said to be so drunk that "he couldn't tell his wife from his son. ... he couldn't tell a bull from a billy-goat" (*ibid.*, p. 114). One evening, when Sosso and his mother heard him coming home amidst singing and blaspheming, they went hiding. When the man came home and there was no sign of his wife and child, he got angrier and started smashing everything. When Sosso's mother came out to beg him to stop, he throws a cooking pot at her and she starts bleeding. "In tears, Sosso grabbed a kitchen knife and stabbed his father who howled like a hyena and died" (*ibid.*, p. 114), leaving Sosso with no option than to become a child soldier. Rita Baclay's sexual harassment is also narrated in a humorous way. She entices Birahima with food and plays with his sex organ. Rita Baclay would kiss his "*bangala* over and over and then she'll swallow it like a snake swallowing a rat. She used my *bangala* like a little toothpick" (*ibid.*, p. 104). Thus, in the novel, almost all disheartened situations are narrated through humour.

The numerous features of the absurd in the novel notwithstanding, *Allah is Not Obligated* cannot totally be said to be absurdist fiction. It is a satire and the absurd is used to heighten the satire. This is because satire can use the absurd as one of its methods but that which is satirised is not necessarily absurd. Objects of satire are generally human weaknesses and

social imperfections whereas, in the literature of the absurd, that which is depicted is always wholly absurd (BALOGUN, 1984, p. 46). It is clear that, in *Allah is Not Obligated*, the world is not depicted as wholly absurd, but rather it is war and its attendant institutions that put children at the war front and deprive them of their childhood which is absurd. At the same time, Kourouma presents the events with disturbing casualness and dispassion. With his curious choice of narrative mode, Kourouma instils Birahima’s account of the atrocities of wars of Liberia and Sierra Leone with a heightened sense of horror. The clear indifference and sarcasm with which Birahima pervades his rendering of the events gives the account an even greater shock value.

Validating the Absurd: Religion and Folk Wisdom

Proving that the absurd is true is at the core of Birahima’s narrative throughout *Allah is Not Obligated*, and it is this “mission” that ultimately shifts the narrative into a postmodern metatextual mode that is quite similar to the use of the absurd in the European context where it highlighted the farcical way in which language generates more language in its pursuit of truth. Throughout the narrative, Birahima finds various ways to vouch for the truthfulness of his story, one of which is appealing to God and the wisdom in folk culture. Birahima’s interest in the truth is seen in the way he despises people who tell lies. He despised Tête Brûlée because of lies. “Commander Tête Brûlée was a fabulist. He’d done everything and everything. And seen everything” (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 72). Equally disliked is Birahima’s cousin Saydou Touré. Birahima says he is “the biggest bawler, the biggest liar, the biggest drinker in all the north-west of Côte d’Ivoire” (*ibid.*, p. 202). Unlike Tête Brûlée and Saydou, who are story tellers, Birahima is a teller of truth, even though he calls his story a “bullshit” story. He tries to assert the truth through appeals to God as the guarantor of all truth, *walahé* (I swear by Allah). He swears by Allah, about fifty-one times in the narrative and sometimes, after swearing, he adds “it’s the truth”. For instance, after describing the situation in Liberia, he has to swear that his aunt lives in such a country and that is where he is also going to live: “And that’s where my aunt lived! *Walahé!* It’s the truth!”

(KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 44). The death rate of child soldiers is so unbelievable that Birahima thinks he has to swear before anybody could believe it. During an attack on Onika's camp, there "was lots of furious gunfire and consequences: bodies, lots of dead bodies. *Walahé!* Five child soldiers and three real soldiers got massacred" (*ibid.*, p. 106). Birahima thinks he has to swear before anybody could believe death has become so common that human skulls are used for decoration in the camps of warlords. The compound of El Hadji Koroma "had human skulls on stakes all around the boundary like all tribal war camps in Liberia and Sierra Leone. *Walahé!* That's tribal wars" (*ibid.*, p. 206). Thus, Birahima's commitment in proving that the absurd is the truth makes him appeal to God as the source of all truth but the more he tries to prove the truthfulness of his story, the more absurd it becomes.

Birahima also appeals to the truth of folk wisdom by referring to proverbs. An example is, "[f]or as long as long as there's head on your shoulders, you don't put your headdress on your knee" (*ibid.*, p. 3). This proverb means one does not do the wrong thing when he/she knows the right thing. Another proverb he resorts to in his narrative is the "grandmother's fart", which means something which is not worth much. For instance, he explains that he dropped out of school because education was not "worth a grandmother's fart" (*ibid.*, p. 2) since it was not a guarantee for any job. Even though he appeals to the truth of these and many other proverbs, there are no proverbs that can explain or make sense of the child soldier reality. In general, in this novel oral culture cannot make sense of the new world.

Validating the Absurd: Dictionaries and Reason

At the beginning of the novel, Birahima informs the reader that he has four dictionaries with which he presents his story because he wants all sorts of different people to read his "bullshit":

colonial *toubabs*, Black Nigger African Natives and anyone that can understand French. The *Larousse* and the *Petit Robert* to look up and check and explain French words so I can explain them to Black African Natives. The *Glossary of French Lexical Particularities in Black Africa* is for explaining African

words to the French *toubabs* from France. The *Harrap's* is for explaining pidgin words to French people who don't know shit about pidgin (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 3-4).

The *Larousse* and the *Petit Robert* being very authentic French dictionaries shows how authentic Birahima wants to be in narrating his story. However, from the outset, we see that his story cannot be believed because his use of the *Harrap's* is wrong. It is a French/English dictionary, but he uses it to explain pidgin words, while the *Glossary of French Lexical Particularities in Black Africa* does not exist in reality.

The dictionaries were inherited from Varrasouba Diabate, a reputable traditional *griot*, who also acted as translator for the colonial masters. The griots were very important figures in African societies during the colonial era because of their roles as interpreters and intermediaries between the white man and the black man. Birahima's use of dictionaries from such a person shows his bid to prove the authenticity of his story. In order to prove the truth, he is going to refer to the authority of the dictionaries, and thus endorses a completely literal thinking. To be literal means “representing the very words of the original, verbally exact, exactly copied, true to life and realistic” (HORNBY, 2000, p. 783). Thus, the absurd reality of the child soldier experience seems so fictional that he cannot use figurative or metaphorical language. Only the literal truth will be believed by the reader. But with this form of validation, words refer to more words, and ironically sometimes they refer to exactly the same words, as the epigraph that begins this paper humorously shows. Birahima defines “ordeal” as “a severe or trying experience intended to judge someone's worth” (KOUROUMA, 2011, p. 10). Also, according to his *Larousse*, “‘subjugation’ means ‘made subservient to, dependent on another person’” (*ibid.*, p. 149). All these definitions are frustrating since the words used to define other words tend to refer to the same thing and thus fail to achieve the truth it is meant to achieve.

In a world turned upside down, Birahima still wants to prove the truthfulness of his story. With the help of these dictionaries, Birahima defines as many as two hundred and fifty-four words in the narrative. In most cases, he indicates which dictionary a particular definition is from, while in

some instances he just defines without indicating which dictionary he uses. For example, it is according to the *Larousse* that he knows that “ecumenical mass” means “where there is Jesus Christ and Mohammed and Buddha” (*ibid.*, p. 47). Also, “according to the glossary, *bilakoro* is an uncircumcised boy” (*ibid.*, p. 5) and “‘perjury’, according to my *Larousse*, means ‘the deliberate, wilful giving of false testimony under oath’” (*ibid.*, p. 127). He chooses to explain some words twice or even thrice, especially the African words and expressions. He defines the words *gnama* twice (pages 4 and 89), *doni doni* twice (pages 77 and 144), *gnona gnona* twice (pages 84 and 149), *bilakoro* twice (pages 5 and 28), *makou* thrice (pages 50, 146 and 236), while he defines the expressions “foot to the road” twice (pages 39 and 53) and “fitting sacrifice” also twice (pages 35 and 93). Looking at the page intervals between the definitions, it could be argued that Birahima may think his readers might have forgotten the meanings of these words and expressions, hence their redefinition, which shows his commitment at proving the truthfulness of his story. Nevertheless, the choice of words he decides to define has nothing to do with the difficulty level of the word. For instance, he defines the words ‘sacrifice’, ‘journey’, ‘gradually’ and ‘inhumanity’ while he refuses to define words like ‘catacomb’, ‘decapitated’, ‘outrageousness’ and ‘hullabaloo’. This shows that Birahima’s commitment is to make his absurd story believable, so he explains words which will validate his experience, which is unbelievably absurd, rather than words the reader may not be familiar with.

Even though Birahima seeks different ways to validate the absurdity of his war story, by appealing to God as guarantor of truth and the wisdom in folklore, the dictionaries are the final evidentiary support of the truth he wants to establish. This is because dictionaries have been proven to be very authoritative guides to language since they are resources for finding word meanings, parts of speech, word origins as well as synonyms and antonyms. As language evolves, lexicographers are also committed to keeping up to date with the changing needs of its users. The *Larousse*, for instance, is designed to make access to appropriate translation as straightforward as possible, as it provides a practical guide to everyday language usage. Like the *Larousse*, the *Harrap’s* is an English-French or French-English dictionary that provides an authoritative guide to

the language in key areas such as technology, business and finance. Its inclusion of colloquialism from both languages makes it a practical guide to conversation while the *Petit Robert* is a single volume French dictionary which is meant to explain French words as thoroughly as possible. With the qualities of dictionaries, and particularly the dictionaries Birahima uses to tell his story, there is no doubt that the dictionaries are his most authoritative form of validation.

Nevertheless, even though the dictionaries seem to have more authority, they are not able to prove the truth of Birahima’s absurd story. As mentioned earlier, his use of some dictionaries is not what they are meant for. More importantly, the dictionaries only prove the truth through language which also appeals for truth through more language. Thus, we see Birahima using more words to explain single words, yet not achieving the reality he wants to achieve. This is due to the fact that language cannot let the actual reality reveal itself, so we see at the end of the novel that the reader is taken back to the beginning with Birahima, unable to validate his absurd story and the reader not making any progress. Birahima will tell us his story again to prove its truthfulness, and, when we reach the end, we will again go back to the beginning in an infinite and eternal circle that imitates the fact that there is no escape from language into truth. Birahima’s inability to prove the truthfulness of his story using dictionaries is in consonance with Derrida’s idea that language produces meaning only with reference to other meanings against which it takes on its own significance (*apud* AGGER, 1992, p. 143). This means that one can never establish stable meanings by attempting correspondence between language and the world addressed by language. Every definition and clarification has to be defined and clarified in turn; leaving us in a circle like Birahima’s story. Birahima can never get out of the prison house of language. Language thus fails to validate Birahima’s absurd story despite its authenticity.

Using dictionaries to tell an oral story using features of the oral tradition, Birahima combines the wisdom in books and the wisdom of traditional folklore, making the novel an oral tale morphed with script culture to bring out the absurdity of war. Yet, neither traditional wisdom nor the wisdom in books is able to make his story believable. The novel, therefore,

establishes wars which create child soldiers as a development whose absurdity cannot be validated.

Conclusion

Allah is Not Obligated is about validating the truth of the absurd experience of its protagonist, whose experience of war reverses all the values his society expects him to acquire after his initiation. Birahima tries to prove the truthfulness of his experience through the use of folk wisdom, appealing to God and finally to dictionaries as his ultimate evidence. However, the more he uses language to validate the truthfulness of his story, the more absurd it becomes. At the end of the novel, the reader is taken back to the beginning and realises that no progress has been made. Birahima will tell us his story again to prove its truthfulness, and, when we reach the end, we will again be back at the beginning in an infinite and eternal circle that imitates the fact that there is no escape from language into truth. Thus, Birahima's attempt to validate his experience comes to nothing, just as his development is arrested. It can, therefore, be concluded that it is the unnatural condition of the child soldier experience that forces the novel out of realism into the absurd.

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Resumo**“Walahé!”; “Você tinha que ter visto”:
validando a verdade dos absurdos da
guerra em *Allah is Not Obliged*, de
Ahmadou Kourouma**

Allah is Not Obliged, de Ahmadou Kourouma, é uma obra de ficção baseada nas guerras civis nos países da África Ocidental Libéria e Serra Leoa resultantes do colapso da democracia. Através do ponto de vista de um narrador infantil, Birahima, um pícaro literalista, a obra narra as atrocidades da guerra. O romance, essencialmente uma sátira, emprega os recursos da ironia e do humor para permitir que Birahima apresente seu mundo deturpado e sua moralidade invertida de uma maneira que faz o leitor rir apesar do horror. É difícil aceitar como verdade a realidade que Birahima vivenciou na guerra, que deixou o seu desenvolvimento em uma espécie de limbo. No entanto, ele se utiliza da linguagem ao máximo para provar a veracidade do absurdo que ele narra. Este artigo considera como a entrada do protagonista/narrador Birahima na guerra o deixa em um limbo cíclico e absurdo, enquanto ele se frustra para validar sua experiência absurda apelando a Deus, à sabedoria popular e aos dicionários.

Palavras-chave: Ahmadou Kourouma. Absurdo. Soldado infantil. Sátira. *Allah is Not Obliged*.