

When a Modern Hero Tramples the Epic World: Ahmadou Kourouma and the Ideological Manipulation of Epic in *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*

Susan Gorman
MCPHS University

"Sundiata was like an ideology. Almost all of the Manding people have their children read it, telling them that this is the basis of our civilization."
—Ahmadou Kourouma

The Epic and Novel in Francophone West Africa

Ahmadou Kourouma's novel *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* demonstrates exciting possibilities for interpretation in relation to the epic genre. Epics and novels do not have absolute meaning in and of themselves as genres, but rather their meanings are defined by where and when they are written and read, and by how they are used in combination with one another. I am led in this idea by Wai Chee Dimock, who wrote in "Genres as Fields of Knowledge" that the epic is an eminently open genre: "There is no better example [than the epic] of a genre that spills over . . . Saturated and resaturated by human needs, the epic is what we collectively make of it: it can be poetry, fiction, or street performance, just as its habitats are both east and west, high and low, ancient and modern" (1379). Written and rewritten across time periods and languages, epics have repeatedly demonstrated their abilities to adapt. The changing implications of the epic encourage a reevaluation of how authors employ genres as contextually bound creations. Kourouma's novel includes references to and parodies of a politically significant epic, *Sundiata*, which showcase the disillusionment that stems from changes that occurred between the 1960 independence moment of the Francophone West African colonies and the late 20th century, about forty years later. These changes are emphasized in the novel, not directly through the plotting or the characterization, but through how genre is deployed.

The *Sundiata* epic has been reworked multiple times by authors in West African writing.¹ It has been echoed reverently as well as parodied, and yet it remains significant to writers and readers. Dimock writes that the epic is "what we collectively make of it"; this article evaluates a specific example of what one writer makes of it and how he uses the *Sundiata* epic in order to convey ideological meaning. Kourouma's use of the epic, and his work's innovations, move away from the political/ideological deployment of the epic genre in Francophone African writing

that begins with the genre's interpellation by Négritude. Instead, his novel *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* offers a more cautious view of the epic genre's political meaning. In lieu of the *Sundiata* epic's demonstration of the capacity for positive African self-governance, Kourouma's use of epic highlights the disillusionment about Francophone African politics that emerged because of the corruption and power abuses of the postcolony. Ultimately, Kourouma's work illuminates another way for the epic genre to generate meaning, one not tied to previous ideological uses.

Négritude, an influential and highly criticized Francophone African literary and political movement founded in Paris in the 1930s, took up the genre of the epic for its own purposes. Initially established as a reaction to French colonialism and its "civilizing mission," Négritude has been constantly revised and re-invented. As initially conceived, Négritude had three main goals. The first emphasized nostalgia for an idealized African past. Second, it desired the creation of an African nationalist consciousness that would fight European cultural imperialism. Finally and most importantly for this study, Négritude emphasized the recapturing of traditional African oral literature. Oral works, present in Africa well before colonialism and symbolically linking to a time period prior to colonization, were a way to approach both that nostalgic pre-colonial past and an African nationalist consciousness. This kind of oral cultural production was crucial to understanding Africa's past as well as to creating a new, post-independence future. Négritude appeals broadly to questions of identity and self-construction, and raises questions concerning the association of politics and literature, the contradictions and discourses of the West and Africa, and how people who have been colonized can find their own voices and use them.

Négritude privileged the epic genre rather than the novel form not because of an aesthetic preference for it *per se* but rather because of its political implications. The novel was associated with the imperialist/colonizing regime while the epic form reached back before colonization. Political connotations, rising out of the literature's relationship with empire and imperial educational systems, overshadowed any purely formal considerations of the genres. Since epic could fulfill political functions, it did not need to be evaluated aesthetically before being espoused by the Négritude movement. The novel, with its highly colonial connotations, also was not assessed for aesthetics but rather eschewed because of politics.

One of the epics that Négritude's commitment to the genre promoted was *Sundiata*, an epic that chronicled the rise of the Empire of Mali. After the fall of the Empire of Ghana in the 10th century BCE, power was not centralized but scattered through many smaller kingdoms, as is discussed by Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle in *Into Africa: A Journey through the Ancient Empires* (258). The ruler of the area in present-day Guinea where the Empire of Mali eventually gained a stronghold was Sumanguru Kante, who joined the Sosso people together into a strong army. In the

early 13th century, Sundiata Keita, the hero of the *Sundiata* epics, raised an army against Sumanguru Kante, won control of the area and created the Empire of Mali. Sundiata then unified kingdoms that were falling into disarray after the collapse of the Empire of Ghana and created a fixed social structure that strengthened his claims to rulership. He divided Malian society into thirty clans based upon work performed and then divided the population into two groups: freedmen or artisans, and slaves. The leadership of Sundiata was so strong that, as Colin McEvedy writes in *The Penguin Atlas of African History*, “by the end of his reign Sundiata was master not only of Mali but also of Ghana, Walata, Tadmekka and the Songhai” (56). Sundiata made of the disorganized states a land of peace, prosperity, and learning, eventually making his court a locus of Arab scholarship.

Versions of the epic diverge, as they do for most oral epics. However, most of the variations contain the same basic tale. The narrative usually begins with Sundiata’s genealogy.² It follows how his parents are brought together—with the help of a Buffalo-woman/ sorceress and the two men who slay her—and how they ultimately become parents to a son. Sundiata’s difference is initially presented as lameness, and he is depicted as being unable to walk like his agemates until his strength is seriously called into question when his mother is mocked for having borne a son who is unable to provide for her. Once Sundiata’s strength is proven and he gains the ability to walk at the age of seven, he becomes a threat against his older half-brother’s power. So, in order to avoid any harm that may come to him, Sundiata’s mother takes him, his sisters and his half-brother Manding Bory, to Ghana to seek refuge and safety. Sundiata becomes a powerful warrior. He eventually, when the predestined time had come, returns to Mali in order to fight Soumaroro Cissé, a neighboring monarch who has supposedly taken the kingdom away from Sundiata’s weak elder brother. After prolonged battles, Sundiata is victorious and takes control of Mali as it was prophesied that he would.

The Sundiata story, and especially the way that it was epicized, have become highly political in the post-colonial African states. This epic had a major impact on the understanding of African history before colonization that was laden with political meaning by Négritude. Both Sékou Touré from Guinea and Modibo Keita from Mali claimed ties to families descending from characters mentioned in the Sundiata epic.³ This African epic, existing before European contact with the continent, represented the greatness to which purely African political endeavors could aspire. Ahmadou Kourouma talked about the importance of the *Sundiata* epic in a *Callaloo* interview with Jean Ouedraogo in 2000. Kourouma says, “Sundiata was like an ideology. Almost all of the Manding people have their children read it, telling them that this is the basis of our civilization” (1345). Thus, the epic genre and the *Sundiata* epic in particular were imbued with ideological significance. As Négritude harnessed it and created a “basis of . . . civilization,” this genre showed what Francophone African artists and politicians could do and the particular story from the

past forecast a rosy postcolonial future for the countries seeking independence. Kourouma's interview indicates that he sees the *Sundiata* epic as a foundational text, and I claim his novel then is in dialogue with the epic. What interests me about these topics is the trajectory of the political significance of the epic: it is initially pushed aside by the French colonial project to supplant a new culture and is then recaptured by Négritude as a way to reclaim a chthonic culture. When Kourouma uses it, it is again refigured. What he makes of the epic genre is a vehicle that demonstrates the breakdown of Négritude's ideals. That is, he deflates the optimism from the independence moment in which Négritude called upon the epic, and he instead uses the genre to exemplify the Afropessimism of the contemporary moment in the postcolony. He does this specifically by rewriting the *Sundiata* epic at key moments.

Ahmadou Kourouma's *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* and *Sundiata*

Kourouma's third novel, published in 1996, traces the influence of the Cold War on modern West African states by charting the career of a 'big man' politician and the forces—both internal and external—that keep him in power. As he points out, "Nobody can fully grasp the impact of the cold war on the continent. All the big dictatorships that we experienced, all the crimes, the Mobutus, the Bokassas, the Idi Amins, are all creations of the Cold War. That is what I wanted to denounce" (1338). The Cold War becomes, in Kourouma's novel, a backdrop against which African leaders were at certain times little more than pawns in a larger struggle and, at other times, vicious manipulators of global events.

His is a political novel, a bitingly satirical take on West Africa's recent history transmitted through the style of an oral performance. *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* stages a *donsomana* or hunter's praise song about Koyaga, the President of the fictitious République du Golfe, which readers can understand as analogous to modern Togo. The *donsomana* is held both as a marker of the 30th anniversary of Koyaga's rule and also as a pass-time event while the country is awaiting results of an election. It is understood that, despite the new "democratic" elections, Koyaga has fixed the results and will end up being rubber-stamped as a "democratic" president rather than a dictator. Koyaga is a character similar to the dictator of Togo, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, who gained power through a coup d'état in 1967 and would have been celebrating his own 30th anniversary in 1997 a year before the novel was published. Over the course of the six nights of the *donsomana*, the audience both within the novel—those who are listening to the oral performance of Bingo, the *sora* or *griot*—and the reading audience learn about Koyaga. The six nights each have different stated themes: tradition (10), death (67), fate (125), power (181), betrayal (267) and how all things have an end (329). These

themes then resonate with the two main story threads of the novel, that of Koyaga's biography and the growth of the nation.

Koyaga's personal history highlights many features in common with Sundiata's story, although these elements have been refashioned in specific ways. Stephen P.D. Bulman's "A Checklist of Published Versions of the Sunjata Epic" notes that versions of the epic generally include five elements: "paternal ancestry of Sunjata," "buffalo-woman tale" which leads to the marriage of Sunjata's parents, "birth and childhood of Sunjata," "exile of Sunjata" and "return and war with Sumanguru" (71). So too does Kourouma include many of these story elements. He begins by writing stories of Koyaga's father and mother and the beginnings of their marriage. Kourouma also includes details regarding Koyaga's school days and his youth spent fairly ingloriously fighting as a young soldier, a focus on growth and adolescence that is similar to stories of Sundiata's childhood. Upon his return to the République du Golfe when the war ends, Koyaga is rejected from the national army and becomes a leader of mercenaries. There is a confrontation between Fricassa Santos, the first president of the République du Golfe, and Koyaga, and Koyaga emerges as a major political figure after Santos's death. Power is uneasily shared by four men, and after a massacre, Koyaga goes to the national radio station and proclaims himself the leader in a military coup (120-121). Instead of a period of exile such as Sundiata had, Koyaga, in *Vigil Four*, visits, speaks to, and learns from thinly veiled dictators of African countries. He visits Tiekoroni, dictator of the République des Ébènes (185) in which he learns lessons of leadership.⁴ He visits Bossouma, Emperor of the Pays aux Deux Fleuves (208) and then dictators of two other countries, the République du Grand Fleuve (226) and the Mediterranean République du Nord (256). Thus, instead of being forced out of his home country, as Sundiata was, Koyaga chooses to spend time away. The novel then ends as Koyaga becomes an increasingly paranoid leader who lasts despite multiple attempted *coups d'état* until President Mitterand ultimately declares that African dictatorships must become democracies, ushering in a period of political and social unrest. The jobless youth agitate for revolution, and after multiple demonstrations, some with fatalities, the National Assembly is dissolved in favor of a National Conference to determine the future of the state (356). However, even though Koyaga is ousted, the people's lives are still miserable, and they begin to feel nostalgia for the time of Koyaga's rule. He returns to popularity when yet another assassination attempt occurs. When Koyaga is presumed to be dead, the populace begins to turn wild, with no one following the rules that had kept society orderly. When he returns to public view, he needs to figure out how to gain control again, and so he holds the purificatory rite, the *donsomana*, before the elections.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Négritude promoted the idea of authors reaching back into a precolonial African past, the kind of time and place highlighted and extolled in African oral epics such as *Sundiata* and the *Epic of Askia Mohammed*. The epic genre inflects all four of Kourouma's

works, prompting Justin Bisanswa to claim: “Through the structure used, the characters presented, through narrative voices used, Kourouma gives an epic breath to his work. The epic, in itself a model for Malinkes, brings to the novelist unique features. The onus is on him to grasp and adapt them to his liking or ignore them” (84). The adaptation of the epic genre and interpretations thereof form the major focus of this paper, as I now begin to talk about how Kourouma uses the epic genre in his novel in order to make claims about why he “grasp[s] and adapt[s]” epic as he does.

Sundiata, the eponymous hero of the epic, is linked to Koyaga in many ways, some broadly thematic and some more specific. The epic generally notes Sundiata’s skill at hunting, his manipulation of magic, his predestination to be a great leader, his skill at divination and his label as “Father of the Manding.” Kourouma ties his hero to all of these major themes in the *donsomana* staged in his novel. On the first page, Bingo the storyteller, directly says to Koyaga, “Vous êtes chasseur” [“You are a hunter”], and then he elaborates upon that by saying, “Vous resterez avec Ramsès II et Soundiata l’un des trois plus grands chasseurs de l’humanité” (9) [“With Ramses II and Sundiata, you are forever one of the three great hunters among men” (1)]. After that, though, the text begins to highlight unusual elements of Koyaga’s hunting that differ from Sundiata’s skill. Sundiata used hunting to demonstrate to his community that he was comfortable with leadership and a man to be trusted. Koyaga uses hunting to get out of his school exams and exhibits great cruelty in the animal hunts the text mentions, even going so far as to kill animals tied to sorcery who are able to shape-shift (70). Further, his destiny to be a great leader does not come from links to his own father, as Sundiata’s did. In the epic, Sundiata’s father Maghan Kon Fatta’s *griot*, Dankouman Touman, showed great faith in Sundiata’s destiny; in the novel, the marabout who wanted to get his mother into bed first voices Koyaga’s destiny to be a great man. Sundiata is the “Father of the Manding,” and Koyaga is mentioned as “The father of our nation,” but by then the nation has fallen to pieces under his abusive regime. Many of the tropes normally associated with Sundiata are inverted by Kourouma here in this novel.

Both the *Sundiata* epic and *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* purport to be transcriptions of oral performances and announce themselves as such in the beginnings of their texts. So, in the D.T. Niane version of the *Sundiata*, the *griot* introduces himself by stating at the outset that “Je suis griot. C’est moi Djeli Mamdou Kouyaté, maître dans l’art de parler. Depuis des temps immémoriaux les Kouyaté sont au service des princes Kéita du Manding : nous sommes les sacs à parole, nous sommes les sacs qui renferment des secrets plusieurs fois séculaires” (9) [“I am a *griot*. It is I, Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté, son of Bintou Kouyaté and Djeli Kedian Kouyaté, master in the art of eloquence. Since time immemorial, the Kouyatés have been in the service of the Keita princes of Mali; we are vessels of speech, we are the repositories which harbor secrets many centuries old” (1)]. Similarly, the status of an oral performance with a

particular and self-introduced speaker is highlighted in the Kourouma novel. In his text, the speaker announces very early on “Moi, Bingo, je suis le *sora*; je louange, chante et joue de la cora. Un *sora* est un chanteur, un aède qui dit les exploits des chasseurs et encense les héros chasseurs. Retenez mon nom de Bingo, je suis le griot musicien de la confrérie des chasseurs” (9) [“I am Bingo, the *sora*; I sing, I pay tribute and pluck the cora. A *sora* is a teller of tales, one who relates the stories of the hunters to spur their heroes to greater feats. Remember the name of Bingo, I am the *griot*, the poet and chronicler, the musician of this Brotherhood of Hunters” (2)]. Both texts tie themselves to the tradition of orality, which was the conduit for the African epic tradition when the French *mission civilisatrice* sought to deny the existence of purely African cultural production before colonization. Echoing the oral tradition’s revival of the epic genre in this particular context loads what follows with an ideological meaning; Négritude sought to promote the oral tradition as a reminder of what African art could be, whereas writers like Kourouma engage it for different meanings.

Adding Violence to the Epic References

Further, there is a similarity between the two works in terms of how the hero’s parents’ marriage is initially consummated. In the two narratives, the wife puts up a great fight so as not to lose her virginity, and both marriages are basically consummated in rape. In the *Sundiata* epic, Sundiata’s father Nare Maghan is initially rebuffed by his new bride (11) and he is troubled by this. He eventually is able to consummate the marriage by frightening Sundiata’s mother Sogolon by saying to her that he was given signs that indicated that he must actually “te sacrifier à la grandeur de ma maison” (31) [“sacrifice you to the greatness of my house” (12)]. As he approaches her with a sword as though to kill her, “he seized Sogolon by the hair with an iron grip, but so great had been her fright that she had already fainted. In this faint, she was congealed in her human body and her wraith was no longer in her, and when she woke up, she was already a wife” (12). Thus, the consummation happens when she is unconscious, indicating a violence upon her body that initiates the marriage. In Kourouma’s novel, the *griot* explains that among the Naked People—Koyaga’s ethnicity—there are two types of marriage: “le mariage-fiançailles et le mariage-rapt” (41) [“marriage by betrothal and marriage by abduction” (39)]. Koyaga’s father Tchao abducts his new bride Nadjouma, and this event sets up the next events:

Nadjouma surgit de la brousse, Tchao se débarrasse des flèches et du carquois et, comme un fauve, fonce sur l’aimée, la soulève, la hisse sur ses épaules. La fille se débat et injurie le garçon, lance le défi. Elle est vierge. Elle a donc son honneur à défendre et ne peut pas se laisser emporter comme une biche morte. Son amoureux la pose à terre et l’homme et la femme aussitôt engagent la lutte, une vraie lutte. Une

lutte qui dure tout un après-midi. Tchao le champion des hommes contre Nadjouma l'invaincue des femmes. Il ne suffit pas de terrasser Nadjouma, il faut la violer (42)

[Nadjouma appears suddenly from the undergrowth, Tchao throws down his arrows and his quiver and, like a wild animal, charges at his loved one, hoists her onto his shoulders. The girl struggles and swears at the boy, throwing down the challenge. She is a virgin. Her honour is therefore at stake, she cannot allow herself to be carried off like a dead doe. Her lover lays her down on the earth and a fight ensues, a true fight. A fight which lasts through the whole afternoon. Tchao, champion of men, against Nadjouma, the unbeaten champion of women. It is not enough to pin Nadjouma, she must be raped (40-41)]

This marriage, too, begins in a violent manner. In this passage, the violence is not glossed over as it was in the *Sundiata* epic; the struggle is extended. It is also straightforwardly acknowledged as rape; this more overt recognition of the violence of the situation is in keeping with the other violent moments in Kourouma's novel. This work does not simply gloss over uncomfortable portions of narrative; Kourouma dwells on them here and also later where he makes changes to the *Sundiata* story in his work, a choice that has specific ideological implications.

Another significant rewriting of the *Sundiata* story, which also emphasizes violence, is the adaptation of the major battle between Sundiata, the man who sought to unite the various peoples, and an evil despot and sorcerer, Soumaoro. Soumaoro had taken power illegitimately while Sundiata was in exile, and Sundiata fought to reclaim his birthright. In that hard-fought battle, Soumaoro uses his magic to protect himself and has the ability to disappear from the battlefield. Ultimately he is brought down when Sundiata's sister reveals to him the way to defeat Soumaoro's magic: to attack him with a poisoned cockspur, which would render him vulnerable to weaponry once again. Niane's version of the epic highlights the instrument that will bring about Soumaoro's downfall, writing that Sundiata "décrocha son arc du mur et la flèche fatale. Ce n'était point une flèche de fer, c'était du bois avec au bout un ergot de coq blanc. L'ergot de coq était le Tana de Soumaoro, secret que Nana Triban avait su arracher au roi de Sosso" (117) ["unhooked his bow from the wall, along with the deadly arrow. It was not an iron arrow at all, but was made of wood and painted with the spur of a white cock. The cock's spur was the Tana of Soumaoro, the secret which Nana Triban had managed to draw out of the king of Sosso" (64)]. Sundiata follows through on his sister's advice and is ultimately able to rout his enemy whose vulnerability to this particular weapon is highlighted. The epic recounts that "La flèche partit, elle toucha Soumaoro à l'épaule, l'ergot de coq ne fit que l'égratigner, mais l'effet fut immédiat et Soumaoro sentit ses forces l'abandonner" (119) ["the arrow flew and grazed Soumaoro on the shoulder. The cock's spur no more than scratched him, but the effect was immediate and Soumaoro felt his powers leave him" (65)]. The significance of this weapon, whose efficacy was recounted to the hunter Sundiata by his sister, is enormous.

In Kourouma's novel, the battle between Sundiata and Soumaoro becomes a coup d'état take-over bid by the main character Koyaga who seeks to oust the first President of the République du Golfe, Fricassa Santos. In the novel, Santos senses Koyaga's coup attempt, stating frequently that the one who would attempt a takeover was coming and that only one of them would survive. The fight between these adversaries takes place at the Presidential palace, with Santos cutting the power at a key moment and "disappearing." Koyaga had been forewarned that Santos might be invulnerable, so he has a moment of discouragement. At the climax of the fight, Kourouma writes :

Koyaga accourt et, avant que le Président atteigne la grille, il décoche de son arc une flèche de bambou agencée au bout d'un ergot de coq empoisonné. Les devins avaient révélé au chasseur que seule une flèche dotée d'un ergot de coq empoisonné pouvait annihiler le blindage magique du super-initié qu'était le Président, pouvait rendre sa peau et sa chair pénétrables par du métal (100)

[Koyaga rushes over and, before the President reaches the gate, taking his bow, he fires a bamboo arrow, tipped with a poisoned cockspur. The seers have told the hunter that only an arrow tipped with a poisoned cockspur can destroy the magical shield of a super-initiate such as the President, rendering his skin, his flesh pervious to metal (109)]

This direct allusion to the fight in the *Sundiata* epic is clear; as Santos becomes linked to Soumaoro, so too Koyaga has become an analog to Sundiata, only not quite a straightforward one. In this novel, Kourouma takes the situation that represented Sundiata's rise to power and writes it on top of post-independence African political history by changing the context to a post-independence event. However, while Sundiata is clearly the better choice in the battle between himself and Soumaoro, it is not clear that Koyaga is the better choice than Santos. If anything, his actions disrupt social stability, setting the stage for the horror that his reign becomes.

An additional layer of violence is written into the narrative, as in the epic, Soumaoro does not die. Instead, he runs away and takes refuge in a cave where Sundiata cannot reach him; that is the end of his story. In the novel, Koyaga's men kill Santos and do so bloodily. Then, they desecrate his body by performing a "ritual emasculation" upon it. These connections can take us out of the epic and into Togolese history, wherein Gnassingbé Eyadéma was part of a coup d'état in 1963 that killed Togo's first president, Sylvanus Olympio. Eyadéma has even bragged that he personally killed Olympio, even though witness testimony may not support that claim. So, what Kourouma has done has changed the *Sundiata* epic to include and reference contemporary politics and contemporary memory. This novel highlights the violent death of the legitimate president at the hands of the perpetrator of a coup d'état, a choice that only highlights the killing of Santos/ Olympio as a point of divergence from the epic. The epic is neither so violent, nor so cruel as history.

In the epic, soon after Soumaoro's troops' defeat, Sundiata calls together the various peoples and creates a legislative body that ensures stability. The group functions as a univocal community and ousts people who appear to be too individually-focused. With Sundiata as its head, the group leads the newly formed Malian Empire. Niane's version of the epic indicates that this group came together regularly each year in order to talk over issues of communal significance and to reinforce group values, disciplining members of the group when needed (146-7). Sundiata's post-victory community is one that is stable and fully integrated. The different peoples in the empire work together; they fear Sundiata, but the fear he inspires is not taken advantage of for personal gain but instead for the community's gain. In Kourouma's novel, the analog to this scene is a coming together of the major leaders who stepped forward to fill the power vacuum left by former president Fricassa Santos's bloody and violent death at the hands of Koyaga. Four men share power uneasily and increasing violence characterizes the political landscape. The leaders and their generals and major counselors come together for what is called in the novel "une conférence de la table ronde de la réconciliation et de la fraternité" (112) ["a round-table conference of brotherhood and reconciliation" (124)]. Instead of achieving its goal, however, another of the participants sets up a massacre. After excusing himself from the room, the legislative reconciliation room is taken over by automatic gunfire, and almost everyone is killed. Koyaga alone survives, seeking and achieving bloody, wild vengeance on those responsible. He is described as a nightmarish figure rising from underneath a pile of corpses to exact his revenge and he and his men kill and then ritually emasculate their adversaries. Sundiata's legislative council that sets up the rule of the Empire of Mali has become, in Kourouma's novel, yet another opportunity for gruesome political violence to enter into the epic sphere. After these passages, Kourouma explains why Koyaga had not been killed: "On ne charge pas des tirailleurs paléos d'exécuter un maître chasseur bardé de grisgris . . . les tirailleurs évitent de le pointer, redoutant que les balles ricochent sur la carapace magique du chasseur et reviennent les transpercer" (117) ["One does not order . . . infantrymen to execute a master hunter covered in grigri . . . the soldiers did not fire on him, fearing that their bullets would bounce off his magical armour and come back to pierce them" (130)]. The connection is to Sundiata, who was protected by enchantments and sorcery, but also to Soumaoro, whose magical armor was pierced by a cockspur. The allusion is blurred here as Kourouma employs the Sundiata trope and reminds us that Koyaga had been predestined to gain this power. But his predestination seems less a promise of good governance than a threat to the fledgling post-independence state.

Implications of the use of *Sundiata* in Kourouma's Novel

Considering the reworkings of epic content in this novel, I am led back to my original questions: what has Kourouma made of the epic genre, and what does his use of epic demonstrate in terms of new political readings of the *Sundiata*? Further, what are the implications for understanding the epic genre that can be seen through this analysis of Kourouma's work? I will begin here by evaluating the specific changes Kourouma has made in terms of using strategies of narration and content and then move on to a broader discussion regarding epics.

As has been mentioned, those who espoused Négritude promoted returning to the ideals of the epic world as a way of recapturing a lost and denied past. These goals may have been reasonable but ultimately they have created unrealistic expectations of what an African-led postcolonial polity can be. One of the ways that this novel incorporates the return to the epic world is through highlighting orality. The epic has definite and clear ties to the oral tradition and Kourouma's novel purports to have roots in orality also, as I indicated above. However, comparing the effects of orality highlights meaningful differences. In "Of Dangerous Energy and Transformations: Nyamakalaya and the Sunjata Phenomenon," Robert C. Newton writes compellingly about the concept of *nyama*, energy that creates transformation, and how it permeates both the content—characterization and plot—of the epic and also the style of narration of the *Sundiata* epic. As Newton's discussion highlights, this powerful energy is an integral component of oral narrative and also of the *Sundiata* story. *Sundiata* is linked to magic and hunters—two concepts tied to transformation in the West African context (23). His story is one in which he is transformed to become a powerful leader from a disabled child. The vehicle of narration—speech—is itself transformative, turning concepts into spoken reality (22). The epic, as understood then in West Africa, inherently includes transformation. Kourouma breaks that association. Instead of being a marker of transformation and change in his novel, the oral story that is narrated and the character that might undergo a transformation are stagnant. The election happening in the background of the story being told in the *donsomana* is not actually going to create change; instead, it is a marker of how the situation is perhaps changing in terms of the terminology used (that is, now the country will be led by an elected "president" instead of by a dictator) but not in its reality. Koyaga remains a tyrannical ruler, regardless of semantics.

Ultimately, the lack of change leads to a tone of hopelessness. Pius Adesanmi says that "one fundamental consequence of the tragic failure of the postcolonial nation-state in Africa has been the elaboration of discursive positions underpinned by sentiments of despair and hopelessness" (227). Despair seems to be the offshoot of a lack of transformation demonstrated in an election that is bringing a despot back into power, this time as a seemingly democratically elected candidate. Change is sought and transformative power is being harnessed in terms of

the associations with the oral epic—a literary form previously closely tied to those concepts—yet no change occurs. The transformative potential is brought to an abrupt halt as the promise of change in the literary genre and in politics instead produces a sense of inevitable hopelessness; this feeling is an offshoot of the various political systems in West Africa and tied to the neocolonialism of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. There is no way to see the political outcomes of the post-independence era without seeing the after-effects and continuing effects of imperialism. The glowing expectations promised by the Négritude philosophy in such works as the *Sundiata* epic have crashed to earth.

Partly responsible for the sense of despair is the incompatibility of ideals, as promoted by theories such as Négritude, and reality. The return to the ideals of the epic world is rendered impossible in *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*. Négritude may have sought to promote the epic past as a model for the future but Kourouma illuminates the naiveté implicit in those desires by manipulating the epic past and the modern present. Justin Bisanswa explains that ties to the epic genre are not as close in this novel as they are in some of Kourouma's earlier works. He writes, "Here [in Kourouma's last two works] the epic has lost its place; it becomes farcical, tragic, and comical" (84). I assert that the *Sundiata* epic has not lost its place but rather it has carved out a new, invigorating place. Even though there are movements away from some features of the epic in *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, thematic connections and tropes clearly link *Sundiata* to this text. Rather than Bisanswa's diagnosis of epic characters in a modern world (90), Koyaga represents the reverse. He is the eminently modern "big-man" politician-leader whose epic elements are drawn from *Sundiata*, the epic hero; however, those elements are frequently abused. For example, he is forecast to come to power, has a mother who is linked to magic and divination, a father who was a leader (although for reasons tied to his own physical prowess rather than his intellectual abilities), parents whose marriage was consummated in violence, is connected to hunting and magic himself, has a group of loyal followers (the Lycaons, a bloodthirsty and vicious group), gains a *griot* of sorts (Maclédio, a radio personality whose programme is titled "Mémoire de la terre des aïeux" (120) ["The Memory of the Land of our Ancestors" (134)]) and goes on a tour of other leaders. Each of these components individually seems tied to *Sundiata*. However, Koyaga turns out to be a modern character in an epic world, who ultimately destroys it. Conditions make it possible for him to succeed, as *Sundiata* did, in creating a peaceful and stable kingdom; however, Koyaga is not *Sundiata*, and his world does not match the worldview promoted by Négritude. Unlike *Sundiata*, who is constructed as a benevolent ruler who is appropriately feared and respected, Koyaga hides underneath corpses, exacts terrible vengeance, and superficially leads his people all the while exploiting, imprisoning, starving, and killing them. An epic world, such as the one discussed by Négritude and its committed novelists who referenced the *Sundiata* epic reverently, clearly cannot be returned to. By including parodic references

to this particular epic and understanding how the *Sundiata* epic has been interpellated by Négritude, Kourouma uses the epic in a very productive way to demonstrate the despair of the postcolony. One of the key features that Kourouma incorporates into his rewriting of the *Sundiata* epic is, as has been discussed in particular above, violence, as it is the outcome of these destructive realities. The epic glosses over violence to a certain extent; it is present, but it is not a focus of the narrative. Conversely, Kourouma's novel highlights violence in the rape scene that joins Koyaga's parents and in the scene regarding attempts at shared governance. It may be that violence and despair are caught in a cycle, simultaneously being caused by one another.

Kourouma's manipulations to the *Sundiata* story demonstrate the dangers of Négritude's uncritical promotion of the epic as a forecast for a promising future. The novel gets at some of the roots of political disappointments by demonstrating how Négritude acted similarly to the colonizers in some key ways. That is, some proponents of Négritude also manipulated the past in order to gloss over its realities as a means to achieve its desired goals. Without question, Négritude theorists appealed to and used the Malian Empire in a different way than it was appealed to and used by the French colonizers. However, that function of manipulating the past is consistent for both. Kourouma, then, also makes of the Malian Empire what he wishes. For him, he uses references to the Malian Empire as a model upon which he creates his character of Koyaga; however, he injects parody and inverts some of the tropes of the *Sundiata* epic in order to showcase the difference in what was forecast and what actually happened. He exposes through parody just how frequently that past has been manipulated by various groups for various ends by pushing the connection to an extreme.

This novel demonstrates that the new epics are strategically and cynically commissioned by tyrannical politicians such as Koyaga as they await their next position of power, this time supposedly "democratically" elected. By refiguring the treatment of the epic past and the arriving future in epic terms, Kourouma displaces power dynamics in a confusing and yet productive manner. He creates a new world where he demonstrates, through playing with genre, the extent to which truth is malleable and language serves the powerful. The epic genre's world seems a distant unreachable past again, rewritten bloodily in this work.

The novel's subversion of Négritude and its literary treatment of the *Sundiata* epic present a certain vision of African politics and the postcolonial context. Pius Adesanmi notes that in many novels "colonial power and its brutalities either become peripheral issues or are totally discarded. In their place we encounter the much more deadly political realities of the Francophone African Postcolony: monopartyism and presidents-for-life" (231). Kourouma does precisely this type of work. By highlighting the outcomes of "monopartyism and presidents-for-life," he emphasizes the perversion of the standard interpretation of *Sundiata* and the Malian Empire in order to highlight the Afropessimism of the

contemporary moment. In an interesting discursive move, he skips over the French colonial experience and instead shines a light on political problems by inventing the République du Golfe and subsequently parodying the Malian Empire. Hence, Kourouma's novel inverts the standard modes of representing the political value of literature promoted by Négritude and its ideology-laden epic genre, much as the political reality of the late twentieth century was a series of expectations that were themselves flipped. When the idealized post-independence future that was forecast did not materialize, the political realities of the post-colony became devastating. The novel emphasizes that devastation by turning Négritude's tool—oral epics such as *Sundiata*—against itself.

By remaking the epic, Kourouma shows us its flexibility as a genre and its potential for creating meaning. He keeps the epic relevant—by relating it to his new literary production—even while exposing its lack of solid referent. One interesting feature of Négritude's deployment of the *Sundiata* epic, and how it has been incorporated into Kourouma's novel, is that this African past has been repeatedly unsettled. This erasure of the past was a goal of the French *mission civilisatrice* in that it denied the existence of any worthwhile African history prior to colonization, and since then the stakes are high whenever the past's veracity is questioned in a Francophone West African context. However, keeping an eye too closely on the past at the expense of the present ensures problems as well. Négritude sought to retether the African past to literature through works like *Sundiata* as it attempted to reappropriate an essentialist historiography. Now, this novel unsettles it again, parodying the usage of the epic, turning the hero of the venerated Malian empire into the “big-man” politician, who seeks to exploit his people and exterminate his enemies in order to safeguard his own power.

The Malian Empire and its epic have a long history of significance for writers. Now, with novels such as Kourouma's, the usage of the Malian Empire in Francophone African writing continues to be relevant, albeit in a much more pessimistic mode. Connecting Koyaga, his Cold War dictator protagonist of the late twentieth century to the 1960s Négritude image of Sundiata, the thirteenth century founder of the Malian Empire, Kourouma rewrites and re-envisions the past and renders its fictitious nature especially visible. Négritude sought to promote the Malian Empire as a model for the future to a community suffering in the aftermath of the French colonial empire; Kourouma engages the Malian Empire and its literary representation as a means of showing the difficulties of the postcolony and the dangers of an uncritical reading of the past.

This use is a new way of understanding the epic. For a genre that is so frequently tied to tradition and the past, in this novel, the important feature of epic is that it is not solidly tied to an envisioning of history. The historical meaning attached to the epic has been clearly shaped multiple times. The French colonizers sought to disregard the *Sundiata* epic and other African epics as it supplied its own understanding of the past

contrary to their objectives. Subsequently, Négritude used the *Sundiata* epic to link back to an idealized past. Kourouma, however, does something new with the epic. He neither discounts the epic nor idealizes it; instead, by freeing the epic from the ways that it has been attached to the past, he indicates new possibilities for making meaning with the genre. Based on what Kourouma makes of the epic—that is, how it is referenced in his novel—it is revitalized and still bears a significant “ideology,” as he called it in the *Callaloo* interview. It can still be “the basis of . . . civilization,” but understanding of that literary basis is now more nuanced.

Notes

1. The name Sundiata is spelled many different ways, including Sunjata, Son-Jara, and Sundjata. I have chosen to follow the spelling of Sundiata; however, when quoted authors have used variant spellings, I have replicated those in this article.

2. This summary is mostly drawn from D.T. Niane’s version of the Sundiata epic. Other versions of the epic can be found in Gordon Innes’s *Three Gambian Versions* and Stephen P.D. Bulman’s “A Checklist of Published Versions of the Sunjata Epic” lists others. In this essay, I have opted to use Niane’s version of the epic as a referent to note the similarities with Kourouma’s novel. Niane’s version of the epic covers these standard five elements.

3. David C. Conrad’s “Bold Research During Troubled Times in Guinea: The Story of the Djibril Tamsir Niane Tape Archive” indicates an interesting irony about Sékou Touré’s association with the Sundiata epic. Toure’s regime sought to distance itself from traditional religions and rituals in order to create a new national tradition; however, at the same time, Niane’s version of the *Soundjata ou l’épopée mandingue* highlighted “the Guinean people’s pervasive involvement in the supernatural world through sorcery, divination and ritual sacrifice” (356). Even from Niane’s text’s moment of publication, it had a complicated relationship with understanding the past and identity creation.

4. The personal history of Tiekoroni closely mirrors that of Felix Houphouët-Boigny, the first-president-then-dictator of the Cote d’Ivoire from 1957-1993.

Works Cited

Adesanmi, Pius. “Of Postcolonial Entanglement and *Durée*: Reflections on the Francophone African Novel.” *Comparative Literature* 56.3 (Summer 2004): 227-42. Print.

- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. Carol Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. Print.
- Beebee, Thomas O. *The Ideology of Genre: A Comparative Study of Generic Instability*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994. Print.
- Bisanswa, Justin K. "The Adventures of Epic and Novel in Ahmadou Kourouma's Writings." *Research in African Literatures* 38.2 (Summer 2007): 81-94. Print.
- Bulman, Stephen P. D. "A Checklist of Published Versions of the Sunjata Epic." *History in Africa* 24 (1997): 71. Print.
- Conrad, David C. "Bold Research During Troubled Times in Guinea: The Story of the Djibril Tamsir Niane Tape Archive." *History in Africa* 37.1 (2010): 355-78. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Avital Ronell. "The Law of Genre." *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (Autumn, 1980): 55-81. Print.
- Dimock, Wai Chee. "Genres as Fields of Knowledge." *PMLA* 122.5 (Oct 2007): 1377-388. Print.
- Frow, John. *Genre: the New Critical Idiom*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Kourouma, Ahmadou. *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*. Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1998. Print.
- Kourouma, Ahmadou. *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*. Trans. Frank Wynne. London: Vintage, 2004. Print.
- McEvedy, Colin. *The Penguin Atlas of African History*. London: Penguin, 1995. Print.
- Miller, Christopher. *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985. Print.
- Ndiaye, Christiane. "Kourouma, the Myth: The Rhetoric of the Commonplace in Kourouma Criticism." *Research in African Literatures* 38.2 (Summer 2007): 96-108. Print.
- Newton, Robert C. "Of Dangerous Energy and Transformations: Nyamakalaya and the Sunjata Phenomenon." *Research in African Literatures*. 37.2 (Summer 2006): 15-33. Print.
- Niane, D. T. *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1960. Print.
- Niane, D.T. *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1994. Print.
- Ouedraogo, Jean. "An Interview with Ahmadou Kourouma." *Callaloo* 23.4 (2000): 1338-348. Print.