

**REPRESENTING ISLAM IN AHMADOU KOUROUMA'S  
*ALLAH IS NOT OBLIGED* AND MOHAMMED NASEEHU ALI'S  
*THE PROPHET OF ZONGO STREET***

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## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my original work and to the best of my knowledge, it does not contain any material published by any other person, or any material accepted for the award of any degree except where due acknowledgement has been made in this work.

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## DEDICATION

To the One whom no human fully understands –the Almighty God –and to my father,  
Kwesi Siah-Ankrah



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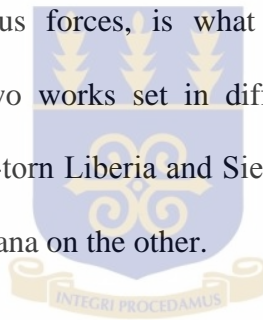
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## ABSTRACT

Islam is one of the major religions of Africa. Islamic issues in society are prominent in some contemporary African fiction, and often these issues are in conflict with social, economic and political forces. This thesis studies the conflict between Islam and the socio-economic and political forces in Ahmadou Kourouma (2000) and Mohammed Naseehu Ali (2005). One observation coming from the study is that Islam succumbs to material realities. Muslim characters often adulterate or renege on their faith in ways that contradict the dictates of the religion. The next observation is that Muslim characters often find no protection in Islam when they are confronted with material realities. How these writers portray Islam as it confronts socio-economic, political, and other religious forces, is what this thesis examines. It makes a comparison between the two works set in different socio-economic and political spaces –Kourouma’s in war-torn Liberia and Sierra Leone on the one hand and Ali’s in the relatively peaceful Ghana on the other.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CONTENTS</b>	<b>PAGES</b>
Title Page	i
Declaration	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Abstract	v
Table of Contents	vi
 <b>1. CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</b>	
1.0 Background to the Study	1
1.1 Islam in African Fiction	3
1.2 Statement of the Problem	6
1.3 Objectives of the Study	7
1.4 Significance of the Study	7
1.5 Theoretical Framework	9
1.6 Justification for the Choice of Theories	15
1.7 Methodology	15

1.8 Challenges	16
1.9 Scope and Limitations	17
1.10 Organization of the Study	18
<b>2. CHAPTER TWO : LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	
Review	19
<b>3. CHAPTER THREE: ISLAM IN <i>ALLAH IS NOT OBLIGED</i></b>	
3.0 Introduction	41
3.1 Islam, Wealth and Marxist Aesthetics	43
3.2 Islam and Violence: the Nexus and Paradox	48
3.3 Islam and the Elderly Characters: the Parody of Morals	55
3.4 Islam and the Child Character	59
3.5 Islam and Women Characters	63
3.6 The Portrayal of Allah in the World of <i>Allah Is Not Obligated</i>	69
3.7 How Islam Relates with other Religions in <i>Allah Is Not Obligated</i>	77
3.8 Islam and Politics: the Marxist Underpinnings	79

## **4. CHAPTER FOUR: ISLAM IN *THE PROPHET OF ZONGO STREET***

4.0 Introduction	90
4.1 Islam and other Religions and Traditions	91
4.2 Of Socio-economic Realities and Islamic [Religious] Issues and the Portrayal of Allah in the World of the Text with Particular Reference to ‘Live-In’	102
4.3 Islam, Gender, Marriage, Sex and Related Issues in ‘The Manhood Test’: the Humour Displayed	105
4.4 Of Socio-economic Realities, Marriage, Peace, and Violence: an Islamic Response in ‘Mallam Sile’	111
4.5 The Tension between Creed and Morals; Theism and Atheism in ‘Faith’	118

## **5. CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

Conclusion	127
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<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>142</b>
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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 Background to the Study

Religion is one of the most emotive of human phenomena. It turns some people into fanatics while others do not follow it with much passion. It seems that religion has become embedded in the lives of many Africans. John Mbiti (1969) observes that ‘Africans are notoriously religious’ (1), and that ‘...where the individual is, there is his religion’ (3). But we discover that even as they are caught in its grip, they find it difficult to maintain a fidelity to its ethical demands in the face of inescapable social pressures. This is to say that the religious person is often faced with adjustment difficulties –whether to satisfy the spiritual or the material needs.

The African continent has three main religions – indigenous African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity. This thesis however focuses on the representation of Islam in Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obligated* (2000) and Mohammed Naseehu Ali’s *The Prophet Of Zongo Street* (2005) to expose the conflicts and contradictions that occur as Islam confronts other religions and social reality.

Some African writers view Islamic characters as faithful to their religion but that is not the case with other writers. Islam in some works is portrayed as being adulterated and subordinated to social context to satisfy the survival needs of its followers. The followers are largely ‘notoriously religious’ often when the faith serves their basic needs; their hearts do not really follow the commandments of the religion. It can be observed that where the commandments impede their need to survive, the Islamic

faith is often compromised. This tendency in some African fiction which features Islamic issues will be examined.

The study looks at how these Muslim writers present Islam in relation to African social problems. Ali addresses Islamic and other religious issues as they confront socio-economic and political issues in Ghana. Kourouma also addresses Islamic and other religious issues along with those dealing with society, politics and economics during the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Apart from important issues like politics, violence, children's and women's issues, language and culture, Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* and Mohammed Naseehu Ali's *The Prophet Of Zongo Street* feature the problems that result from Islam's contact with other religions. The religion the children in *Allah Is Not Obligated*, inherited, for example, is powerless in stopping them from becoming child soldiers and thereby committing the most heinous of war crimes. This therefore necessitates a discussion, via these two West African literary works, of ethical questions in Islam and the conflicts and contradictions that socially beset and often undermine Islamic ethics. The study examines how the choice of settings by the two writers affects their representation of Islam in their works. Whereas Kourouma's novel is set in an environment of turbulence in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the period of their civil wars, Ali's work is set in a relatively peaceful environment largely in Ghana in the fourth republic.

The writers also portray the role Allah plays in the world of their works. The question which is repeatedly asked in Kourouma's novel is, 'Is Allah obliged to be fair about the things he does here on earth?' In Ali's short story the question on Islam, though not explicitly stated, is whether Allah is fair only to his followers for the Islamic creed

they observe or the moral values they follow. I will assess the authors' suggested responses to this question. Also in this discussion is the question of theodicy: if there is a good and perfect God why does he allow evil to exist for people to suffer battling it? Why then should people be blamed when they do all manner of things to escape suffering since suffering is distasteful? These are pertinent questions since it will be found in the discussion that exposure to suffering causes many characters in the texts to act in contradiction to their faiths. That however is not to suggest that suffering is the only reason for the characters' deviation from their faiths. For, it will be found that some characters betray their faith because they are hypocrites and such characters the writers mock and expose.

### **1.1 Islam in African Fiction**

Mbye B. Cham (1985) looks at Islam in some West African literature. He identifies two main opposing critical approaches to writers' views about Islam. He notes that:

on the right pole is that ensemble of attitudes shaped by a zealous embrace and vigorous advocacy of Islam as the best, indeed the only, legitimate and effective vehicle for integration of the individual and society while the left pole posits a fundamentally materialist ideology and artistic creed which portrays Islam as colonial in nature and therefore, an impediment to secular, individual and social fulfillment (Cham 1985: 447).

Given these conflicting groups above Cham cites Chaikh Hamidou Kane (1962) and Aminata Sow Fall (1976) as products of Arab-Islamic, African and Euro-Christian education. He notes that they have embraced the option of combining Islam and tradition and rejecting Euro-Christianity as an intruder into Arab-Islam Africa. According to Cham, Kane's work *Ambiguous Adventure* explicitly represents the rejectionist trend. The conflict between the Euro-Christian and Arab Diallobe results in the death of the central character, the young Samba Diallo. In Cham's view Kane's

novel 'vindicates the view of the ephemerality of mortal existence and primacy of the spiritual' (Cham, 1985: 451). For Samba Diallo, 'Islam is Diallobe and Diallobe is Islam.' For him, furthermore, the West and its materialistic credo is the antithesis of Diallobe spiritualism and communalism (ibid).

Kane therefore elevates and glorifies the spiritual and plays down the mundane, earthly, and physical which in the framework of this thesis are the social, political and economic. By contrast, Kourouma and Ali appear to turn Kane's view of Islam on its head. In *Allah Is Not Obligated*, Kourouma would therefore be found at the left polar end where, to quote Cham, his 'artistic resolution of the conflicting opposites invariably projects the triumph of the material over the spiritual in different ways.' Cham notes this as characteristic of Sembene Ousmane's declared atheism and Marxism (Cham, 1985: 458,459).

To Cham, religion is rendered more or less powerless when it is confronted with practical problems of hunger, poverty and the law of the state which appears to favour the educated and the wealthy. He adds that 'the opposition between the spiritual and the material laid out in *Ceddo* (1977), Ousmane's first film, becomes one of the main building blocks of each of his subsequent works. The artist systematically undermines the reign of the religious while at the same time glorifying the virtues and practice of practical human action, individual as well as collective' (Cham, 1985: 459,460). And, Kourouma is no less on the materialist side. Ali also elevates the mundane, earthly and physical above the spiritual, though the ethical dimension of Islam is more of a concern to him.

On the left pole, Cham notes a range of African literary works that he describes as 'the irreverents' citing Ousmane's aforementioned *Ceddo* as an outstanding example.

The image of Islam, he notes, is not a good one, because in this work Muslims are presented as scheming fanatics. In the group of irreverent works he also includes Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* (1968) and Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and the nonliterary work of Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization* (1974).

Reading *Allah Is Not Obligated*, it is evident that the spiritual is in no way elevated and that when Islam confronts individual and societal problems, Kourouma gives existential priority to individual and societal needs which are secular and not spiritual. Ali adopts a similar style except that he praises his few spiritually inclined characters especially when they show high ethical standards.

In his categorization Cham notes another group that comes midway between the two mentioned above. 'Between the extremes', he writes,

is a range of artistic responses which are an acceptance of the basic details of Islam, yet are separated here by less zeal and didacticism, thereby a constant alternation between reverence and mockery of Islamic holy men, and again a strident iconoclasm which indicts religious charlatans and distorters of Islam and its institutions (Cham, 1985: 447).

This is the case for certain writers who think that both the positive and the negative elements of Islam should be discussed. These writers render praise where it is due the religion and criticism where they find that some untoward behaviour of some Islamic holy men dents the image of Islam. It can be argued that Ali, unlike Kourouma, falls into this group. Cham suggests that these trends of irreverent attitude toward Islam show a growing current of thought in African literature that brings up Islam as a subject of discussion.

My work therefore seeks to expose the problems that emanate from the literature as the Islamic religion is put to the test by other religions and secular society.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Ali Al Amin Mazrui (2002), talking about Edward Wilmot Blyden who was the Director of Muslim Education in Sierra Leone in 1902, says that although Blyden himself was a Presbyterian Minister he argued that ‘there was an enriching marriage between Africa and Islam’ (190) and that ‘Blyden came close to saying that Islam was the right religion for Africa’ (ibid). Mazrui adds that ‘Blyden’s is what we may call “Islamophilia” (ibid)’.

Mazrui notes though that:

over a century later, however, the scene in Africa is virtually dominated by the opposite orientation towards “Islamophobia”. This is the central thesis that the author [Ahmed S. Bangoura] seeks to elucidate with particular reference to African literature and its critics. He traces this tradition of hostility toward and distortion of Islam to the Orientalist construction of the religion that has been so well documented by Edward Said. This influence of Orientalism is supposedly rooted in the European colonial legacy that has continued to determine the politics of (re) presentation in Africa to this day (190, 191).

Mazrui has thus noted two opposing views of Islam –one positive which he terms ‘Islamophilia’ and the other negative term, ‘Islamophobia’.

Cham (1985) also notes that there are two main opposing attitudes to Islam among writers that take up the religion in their works. One attitude is positive while the other is negative. To writers that represent Islam in a positive way, Islam is the best means for the good of the individual and society. However, to those that represent the religion negatively, Islam is an impediment to the realities of life.

The thesis posits that unlike the African writers who look at Islam in a positive way, Kourouma adopts a radically negative attitude while Ali ‘vacillates between the

positive and negative' but he portrays a more negative orientation than the positive. They play down the spirituality of the religion while elevating the matter of its contradictory implication in socio-economic and political realities. Therefore, they represent Islam as an impediment to the material desires of its followers.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this essay are to:

1. Examine the common portrayal of Islam in the two works.
2. Show how the works present the conflicts and contradictions that beset Islam as it comes face to face with social, political and economic difficulties.
3. Investigate the way in which Allah is conceived, the role he plays in the world of the texts and how this conception is different from or similar to the presentation of Allah in works by other writers, Muslim and non-Muslim.
4. Explore how the writers use literary devices to portray the problems that occur as Islam confronts social realities. How these devices are deployed will help to settle the question of whether or not the Islamic outlook is promoted or criticized.
5. Explore the points of convergence of Islam with and divergence from other religions and how they expose doctrinal conflicts and contradictions.

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

This study extends into a new context of comparison and contrast in the way Islam is portrayed in African literature. One aspect of Islam under exploration as the two works are compared and contrasted is whether it is the creed or the moral demands of this religion that are privileged as it confronts social realities. This study also seeks to

find out how and why the positive image painted by some Muslim writers is sometimes countered by a negative portrayal by other Muslim writers, as in the case of the two under review. Writers who display a negative orientation to Islam expose the weaknesses through characterization, satire, settings, situations, and irony. This research is also significant as it investigates the role Allah plays in the world of the texts as Islamic characters confront social difficulties –whether he supports or abandons them. Doctrinal conflicts and contradictions that occur from this are revealed.

Also, my work is significant for contributing to scholarship that shows and analyzes the negative portrayal of Islam. It has been observed that many literary discussions lately have tended to be on politics, women's issues, language use and others but discussions on religion, especially Islam, seem to have been ignored. Kenneth Harrow (1991) observes that Islam forms a major part of the works of many renowned writers, but unfortunately Islam has not been given the needed attention in literary criticism. Therefore, in his work he discusses Islam in the fictional works of Camara Laye, Chaikh Hamidou Kane, Sembene Ousmane, Birago Diop and Hampate Bâ among others. In fact, Harrow has, to emphasize the importance of critical discourse on Islam, also taken up a discussion of Islam in Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence* (1968). In this work he largely discusses Malinke culture and its blend with Islam and how the religion influences the life of the traditional Malinke people. He observes that Islam and Malinke culture have blended. My work, however, seeks to show the contradictions that blends of any kind bring about. And, sometimes there is no blend at all; the doctrine of the religion is overturned by the characters to meet their socio-political and economic needs.

Ahmed Bangoura (2000) also discusses West African fictional works that have Islam as a subtext. His discussion largely focuses on the historical and sociological contexts of Islam in the West African sub region. To him Islam in such works is (mis)read especially from the point of view of Western readers. He opines that Western readers have provided only a prejudiced image of Islam in their criticism. However, Bangoura discusses Islam in Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* with a positive orientation toward Islam to show that it is not always the case that Islam is represented negatively in contemporary African literature.

### **1.5 Theoretical Framework**

The key theoretical approaches will be Marxism and Cultural Poetics (formerly called New Historicism). The preliminary justification for the choice of these theories is that they are materialist, and in being materialist their confrontation with the religious and spiritual will help reveal the doctrinal problems that result as Islam confronts socio-political and economic realities.

#### **i. Marxism**

Karl Marx (1845) notes that the whole of a people's experience arises out of their social interaction and other daily activities which are responsible for shaping and developing an individual's personal consciousness. Charles E. Bressler (2003) notes that "Marxism is first a set of social, economic and political ideas that its followers believe will enable them to interpret and more importantly, change their world." (170). Marxism has it that:

Ultimate reality... is material, not spiritual. What we know beyond any doubt is that human beings exist and live in social groups. All of our actions and responses to such

activities as eating, working and even playing are related in some way to our culture and society. In order to understand ourselves and our world, we must first acknowledge the interrelatedness of all our actions within society. If, for example, we want to know who we are and how we should live, we must stop trying to find answers by looking solely to religion and philosophy and begin by examining all aspects of our daily activities within our own culture (ibid).

Since religion itself is part of culture it could be argued, based on the foregoing, that the postures of Kourouma and Ali are consonant with this Marxist materialist position in the way they downplay the religious and spiritual in their works. They make mockery of the characters that represent Islam and other religions as the latter confront their own culture and society. A question for these authors is the value of Islamic belief and worldview if it cannot shield its adherents from the economic and political realities of the material world. This matter brings to mind Marxist thoughts, as Marx (1848) makes a proposition that ultimate reality is social and economic and not spiritual or philosophical. Charles E. Bressler explains, 'To Marx, then, our ideas and concepts about ourselves are fashioned in everyday interactions, in the language of real life, and not derived from some Platonic essence or any other spiritual reality' (Bressler, 2003:163).

The above proposition will guide the discussion on the tension in Kourouma's and Ali's works, between Islam and socio-economic and political forces. Marx argues that what we know beyond any reasonable doubt is that our social and economic conditions have an influence on what we believe and value. This should explain why Kourouma and Ali present their characters in such a way that they sacrifice their faith to meet their socio-economic survival interests. The characters are more materialistic than they are spiritual, and where they get seemingly very spiritual it is largely because they want to meet their socio-economic needs. When this occurs, the conflicts and contradictions between Islam and the non-religious, non-spiritual socio-economic

phenomena begin to show. Marxist understanding of this sort of contradiction will be relied on to explain Kourouma's and Ali's views as reflected in the characters, settings, satire, situation, irony and the paradox that arise as religion confronts social and economic forces.

My falling back on Marxist theory is therefore to help me explain why when the religious and spiritual phenomenon –in this case Islam –confronts the realities of the socio-economic and political, it capitulates to them. And when Islamic characters in the works under review contradict Islamic doctrine they show that the material realities of life are what really matters. The theory also supports Cham's left wing categorization, a key basis of my arguments. Cham himself notes that the left wing that elevates the socio-economic and political stems from Marxism which emphasizes the material realities of life and not the spiritual.

However, given the number of problems that every theory including Marxist theory confronts, I do not intend to say that my choice of it has a “‘law-like’ status”, a principle which Stuart Hall (1996) associates with this theory. And in order that I be not ‘haunted by Marx's ghost still rattling around in the theoretical machine’ (Hall 1996: 32) absolute insistence on the materialist, political, and historical will be supported by the use of other post Marxist theories. It is for this reason that a key post Marxist theory, Cultural Poetics, has also been added to explore and expand the scope of the arguments so as not to insinuate that the basic tenets of Marxism already stated are the only ones that should be relied on in this discussion. And that is also not to argue that Cultural Poetics itself offers a full interpretation; rather, in the discussion I undertake, it serves as a complement to Marxism.

## ii. Cultural Poetics

I see Cultural Poetics as helpful in the discussion and analysis of the works by Kourouma and Ali. It challenges Old Historicism which assumes that historians can articulate an internally consistent worldview of any group of people with an accurate and objective picture. Cultural Poetics says that all productions of history are subjective. People's biases often tend to affect their interpretation of the past, so that for the Cultural Poetics critic, history is unable to give us an entirely accurate understanding of past events or a people's worldview. Cultural Poetics:

posits that history itself is one of many discourses or ways of thinking about and understanding the world... It therefore gives its followers the facility to analyse literary texts by highlighting the interrelatedness of all human activities, admits its own prejudices, and gives a more complete understanding of a text (Bressler 2003: 181).

Overall, Cultural Poetics postulates the interconnectedness of all human activities. For the Cultural Poetics critic everything we do is connected to and is a product of our cultures – so that no act in our cultures can be insignificant. Cultural Poetics critics hold that we all have our biases and can never be fully objective. They insist that history and literature must be analysed together and not as separate activities. Cultural Poetics critics like Catherine Gallagher, Jonathan Dolimore, and Jerome McGann view a text as “culture in action” (ibid). Cultural Poetics critics think that:

Only by examining the complex lattice-work of ... interlocking forces or discourses that empower and shape our culture, and by realizing that no single discourse reveals the pathway to absolute truth about ourselves and our world, can we begin to interpret either our world or a text (Bressler, 2003:188).

The implication for Islam is that it cannot be the only and the best means of understanding the world and offering the best solutions to existential problems. For the Cultural Poetics critic the concern is that there is not one voice but many voices to be heard interpreting texts and our culture: our own, the voices of the others, the

voices of the past, the voices of the present, and the voices that will be in the future' (Bressler2003: 190). This is what they think should be used in the interpretation of a text in what they call "thick description", a term coined by the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1973).

Louis Althusser (2008) also argues that 'there is no ideology except by the subject and for the subject' (170). He means that there is no ideology except for concrete subjects, so that the destination for ideology becomes possible by the subject, meaning by the category of subject and its meaning. He supports the argument that man is by nature an ideological being.

Althusser further adds that:

ideology further 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all) or transforms the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by the very precise method which I [Althusser] have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' (Althusser, 2008: 174).

He adds that 'when a police man or somebody else shouts or hails a particular subject it is that person that responds and he becomes the subject of that hailing' (ibid).

To him:

Ideology hails or interpellates the individuals or subjects. As ideology is eternal, I [Althusser] must now suppress the temporal form which I [Althusser] have presented the functioning of ideology and say: ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects which necessarily leads to the proposition: individuals are always-already subjects.(Althusser, 2008:175)

To explain the foregoing, Althusser uses an example to illustrate this ideology: the religious ideology. He chooses the Christian religious ideology 'with the proviso that the same demonstration can be produced for ethical, legal, political, aesthetic ideology etc.' (Althusser, 2008:177). To illustrate the point, he uses God's call of Peter as an example. He notes that God is seen as the Subject with a capital S who calls another

subject with a small s, the two needing each other. Yet another example is God's call of Moses who he calls by name to signify an individual subject. Althusser notes that:

God thus defines himself as the Subject *par excellence*: he who is through himself and for himself ( I am that I am) and he who interpellates his subject, the individual subjected to him by his very interpellation i.e. the individual named Moses, interpellated –called by his name, having recognized that it was ‘really’ he who was called by God , recognizes that he is subject, a subject of God, a subject subjected to God, a subject through the Subject and subjected to the Subject: the proof: he obeys him and makes his people obey God's Commandments (Althusser 2008: 179).

I find here that he does not limit ‘the proviso’ to the Christian religion and so the same can be extended to the Islamic religion and other religions and institutions. In this discussion the proviso extends to the Islamic religion. And following from the foregoing, I will find out how the Muslim characters are ‘interpellated –called by their names’ and the roles they play in the Muslim and secular communities of the texts. For instance, when Kourouma's Yacouba is ‘interpellated’ by the Malinke Muslim family that entrust the young protagonist Birahima into his care, does he respond as positively and ‘satisfactorily’ as Peter and Moses do? And also when Ali's narrator and young character is ‘called’ by both Kumi and the latter's inherited Islamic religion, does he abandon his Islamic religion to accept Kumi's ‘strange’ new religion, the Afromadiyya? Or does he keep to the inherited Allah-sanctioned Islamic calling? Also, what picture is portrayed in the works about Allah as Subject *par excellence* since he is described as not being obliged to be fair about the things he does here on earth? These questions are relevant to this work in the sense that they investigate the characters' faithfulness to Allah and the implications for Islam. For it is argued that he Allah is the cause of all things in both *Allah Is Not Obligated* and *The Prophet of Zongo Street*.

## **1.6 Justification for the choice of Theories**

In sum, Marxist theory will be used to account for why the characters sacrifice their Islamic faith to favour their social and economic needs. The tension between Islamic demands and the demands of the secular, non-spiritual society will be exposed as the theory is applied. What Cultural Poetics also suggests is that the critic should go further by looking at everything including sociology, political science, economics and so on within the social situation. This is to say that I am not attempting to make Marxist theory have a 'law-like' status in my discussion, though it will play a very important role given the manner in which many of the religious characters subvert their religion to meet their materialistic, social, and political ends.

Based on this, theories of human nature and various relevant theories of religion will be used in this discussion to expose the tension that occurs as Islam confronts social realities.

## **1.7 Methodology**

Ira Shor (1974), a Marxist critic, suggests some elements of Marxist criticism which I see as helpful in the analysis of my chosen texts:

1. Does the text raise fundamental criticism about the emptiness of life in ... society?
2. How well is the fate of the individual linked organically to the nature of societal forces? What are the work's conflicting forces?
3. Does the protagonist defend or defect from the dominant values of society? Are those values on the ascendancy or decay?

These are but a few of many of Ira Shor's methodological steps which I see as relevant to this discussion. The principles above will be used to explore how and to what extent the two works under discussion reveal, as in Marxist terms, that the characters are relatively more materialistic than spiritual as they confront the realities of social life.

Stephen Greenblatt, (1973) a Cultural Poetics critic, also suggests that the following points be considered when we are analysing a text from a Cultural Poetics point of view:

1. What kinds of behaviour and models of practice does the work seem to reinforce?
2. Why might readers at a particular time and place find the work compelling?
3. Are there differences between my values and the values implicit in the work I am reading?
4. Upon what social understanding does the work depend?
5. What freedom of thought or movement might be constrained implicitly or explicitly by this work?
6. What are the larger social structures with which this particular act of praise or blame might be connected? (Bressler 2003:190).

By applying the above to the chosen texts in so far as Islam, itself a part of culture of discourse, is concerned, I hope that I will be able to expose the tension between Islam and other religions, and the non-religious social world and lay bare the conflicts and contradictions that emerge as a result.

### **1.8 Challenges**

The choice of the two works by Kourouma and Ali for this discussion is not without problems. One of the problems is the geographical and socio-political spaces in which

the two works are set. Whereas Ali's is set largely in Ghana in the fourth republic, in a period of relative peace in a democratic dispensation, Kourouma's is set in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the period of their civil wars, strife and anarchy. These reveal different sets of authorial attitudes to Islam. However, it is itself being used to strengthen one side of the argument: that given a more politically and economically stable society the tendency to be more religious and ethical is higher than that in a less politically and economically stable society, or vice versa, as the two texts will reveal in their characters and settings and language.

The next problem is that though a lot of critical works can be found on general religious issues, critics do not often discuss the Islamic dimension in literary works. Since the focus on Islam is scanty, it has been difficult for me to have access to a wide range of secondary materials that discuss Islam, especially as it confronts socio-economic, political and other religious forces.

### **1.9 Scope and Limitations**

I am aware of the limitations in the choice of the two texts in making arguments and arriving at conclusions on a topic as dense, intricate, thorny and emotive as religion and particularly the Islamic religion which is central to this discussion. When it comes to a matter as sensitive as religious faith, the tension between 'the spiritual' and 'the real' rises even further. It is also clear that the two texts used for the arguments on Islam may not be able to adequately represent the religion, and that is a limitation of the work.

### **1.10 Organization of the Study**

This research will be organized in five chapters. Chapter one will present the introduction which will comprise the background to the study, the statement of the problem, the objectives of the study, the significance, methodology, challenges, choice of theory, the justification for the choice of theories, scope and limitations.

Chapter two will be on the review of literature.

Chapter three will focus on an in-depth analysis of Islam as it comes face to face with conflicting non-Islamic forces. The chapter also discusses African writers' attitude to Islam along with the view of Islam and Allah in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*. The concern here is how the author expresses the tensions between Islamic doctrine and the demands and pressures of non-Islamic social needs. It also looks at the role of the 'good' and 'bad' man, woman and child to see how it affects the image of Islam in the texts.

Chapter four will focus on an in-depth analysis of *The Prophet of Zongo Street* as Islam confronts conflicting non-Islamic forces. It also looks at the view of Islam on the 'good' and 'bad' man, woman and child along with other social problems as they help to expose the conflicts and contradictions that are created in the text as Islam confronts social realities.

Finally, chapter five will summarize the findings from the two works, conclude, state my personal response, and make recommendations for future studies.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews Islam in West African literature and critical essays on Kourouma's and Ali's works. The literature so far reviewed on Kourouma's and Ali's works does not consider Islam as a central theme. It also does not look at the manner in which Islam relates with secular society and the way the authors represent it. This review also compares Kourouma with Ali. Ali can be said to be relatively 'new' in the literary world. Akin Adesokan (2012) writes that 'Kourouma, the Ivorian novelist and playwright who died in 2003 cannot be described as "a new African writer. He was a leading figure of modern African literature"' (11). Adesokan categorizes Kourouma in a group that includes great writers like Chinua Achebe, Sembene Ousmane, Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. It is for this reason that there are more critical essays on him than on Ali.

Islam has been in Africa for more than a thousand years and its impact and significance cannot be overlooked. It is for this reason that some contemporary fiction writers feature Islam in their works, and Kourouma and Ali are no exceptions. Several authors, as my introduction shows, address the influence of Islam on Africa in their writing. While some portray a positive influence, others portray a negative one. Mazrui (2002) for example, writing on the influence of Islam on Africans, notes in his review of Lamin Bangoura (2000) that:

The one novel that would be particularly vulnerable to Orientalist interpretation is Ibrahim Twahir's quasi-fundamentalist *the Last Imam*. Interestingly enough, we are told, this is a novel that has so far received no critical attention; Bangoura takes the opportunity to fill this gap. In the process he compares Twahir's fiction with the works of both Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Ahmadou Kourouma to unveil the varied nature of the relationship between Islam and indigenous Africa. The review leads

once again to the problematic question of what it means “to be black or African in an Africa where religious loyalties turn out to be more important than ethnic, racial or national loyalties” (191).

Mazrui points out the influence of Islam on Africans. He shows that Africans are torn between the realities of life and ‘religious loyalties’. He indicates though that Africans are more religious than ‘ethnic, racial or national’, or material. This is to say that when the Muslim characters are confronted with material realities in Twahir’s *The Last Imam* they privilege the religious. I however point out that though Africans seem to show ‘religious loyalties’, when they are confronted with material realities they tend to be more concerned with them than the religious and spiritual. The religious and spiritual themselves are used to meet their socio-economic and political needs. This attitude is noticed in Kourouma’s and Ali’s works in this discussion.

*Allah Is not Obligated* has earned critical acclaim in France, winning the Prix Renaudot, le Prix Goncourt de Lyceens (2000), and appearing on the short list for the Goncourt. Adele King (2001) opines that the novel repeats the theme in the *Suns of Independence* in which a young girl barely escapes death after a botched excision. The equivalent of this in *Allah Is Not Obligated* is Birahima’s escape from Togoballa in search of a proper Islamic education in war torn Liberia and Sierra Leone but finally finds himself following his material interest, not the religious. In King’s description of the Muslim character, El Hajj Yacouba, who actually wins the chance to lead Birahima to Liberia and Sierra Leone, the latter does not mention his Muslim identity but rather his being a fetish priest, magician, and money multiplier. This adds to the protagonist’s, and his antagonist’s, pursuit of their material interest rather than the dictates of Islam.

Contrary to Islamic demand for purity of thought and language, Birahima’s language is fraught with curses, which raises questions as to why he puts up this kind of

behaviour. One would have thought that as a Muslim child going through life in the hands of Muslim parents he should not be so badly presented. My questions then are: who or what has raised Birahima this way? Has Birahima strayed from the norms of the Malinke Muslim community because of the community's own straying away from its norms or is it an aberrant behaviour he is putting up? Might it be that he is so insufferable that the community finds him difficult to handle? And to what extent has his Muslim guardian and other Muslim characters either helped or worsened his situation? What impact does his behaviour have on Islam which he is expected to positively represent?

The review also looks at the connection between Islam and socio-political problems in the novels of Kourouma. In the conclusion to her review King observes that:

several commentators have mentioned how critical the novel is not only of the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, but of much of West African culture –prevalence of bribery, tribal tensions, belief in fetish magic. ... There is hardly an admirable character in the book. While he [Kourouma] attacks the Nigerian forces of ECOMOG, Sani Abacha, and Houphouet Boigny, Kourouma describes Western powers as naïve rather than criminal (King 2001:120).

King's view that 'there is hardly an admirable character in the book', and that the novel is critical of the corrupt practices that have become characteristic of West African societies support my discussion of the way Islam is portrayed in the work. I argue that the Muslim characters that Kourouma presents to us are not 'admirable' and thus presents a bad impression of themselves and the religion Kourouma has chosen them to represent. Since King observes that hardly do we find any admirable character in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*, it confirms my view that the religious characters themselves are part of the group and that is why we will find in the selected texts distasteful behaviours put up by all the Muslim characters and indeed all the other religious and political characters. I find, however, that King does not look at the

religious underpinnings of the behaviour of the Muslim characters and their effect on Islam; my work looks at them. King mentions bribery, tribal conflicts and fetish magic as components of what he calls 'West African culture' in *Allah Is Not Obligated*. But, this conflicts with the positive portrayal of African Muslims in Twahir's *The Last Imam*.

For his part, Jean Ouédraogo (2007) observes that Kourouma's novels usually have politics as a central theme. The politics mainly centre on attacking his foe, Felix Houphouet Boigny, who had Kourouma and other critics of his government sent to jail as a result of a suspected coup attempt in 1963. However, according to Ouédraogo, it would be a mistake for readers to consider Kourouma's works 'as history manuals despite their obvious penchant for testimonial or denunciation' (77).

To Ouédraogo, Kourouma has

been lauded as truth teller extraordinaire by readers prompt to see in the chunky details of his writing, nuggets of African political life from the colonial era through decolonization, the cold war, and finally the pervasive civil wars of the last decades, Kourouma reminds us that his work remains first and foremost fiction feigning the autobiographical. Through the complicity of the readers ... the fictional is transformed into the national...At the same time, the derision and parody of specific cultural aspects often end up being perceived and received as authentic discourse or real occurrences by less informed readers. In skillfully blending facts and fiction, Kourouma brought his African and Western readership to a mesmerizing point (ibid).

The 'chunky details' of Kourouma's works which include social, cultural, political and religious matters are brought up in this thesis. I find that Ouedraogo dwells so much on the political that he fails to see the religious. The result is that it gives a myopic view of the problems depicted in the novel. Ouedraogo himself observes that Kourouma makes a 'parody of specific cultural aspects' and I add that the parody does not exclude the characters that represent the religions. My discussion looks at

how Kourouma makes a parody of Muslim characters in his work, and the implications this has for the religion.

Ouédraogo continues that within a space of forty years of not many books, ‘Kourouma, the transplant of the Malinke oral tradition and accidental writer, was able to largely impact African letters over the last forty years, revolutionizing Francophone literature in the same stride. That he attained such heights speaks of his mastery rather than the quantity of his words.’(79). That is to say that though Kourouma does not have many books to his credit, the few he has are rich in representing Francophone literature especially the manner in which he uses the indigenized French in his works. The manner is in adulterating the French language with local expressions. What I call ‘adulteration’ is also seen in Kourouma adulterating not only the sanctity of Islam but all other religions in his work.

Ouédraogo adds that *Research in African Literatures* continues to contribute to the review of Kourouma’s literary productions. In many readings and interpretations of his oeuvre Kourouma is acknowledged for his originality of vision and quality of his aesthetic form. A very important point he notes from Justin Bisanswa (2007) is that in Kourouma’s novels:

what remains is a recognizable world of mock griots, vacuous war feats, lies, and tormented characters who, created to live in epic conditions[...] find themselves confronted with a world of their ambitions’ (ibid).

Ouédraogo concludes his view of Kourouma by making reference to Carol Coates (2001) who argues that Kourouma was simply engrossed in the affairs of Houphouët Boigny, noting that, ‘Kourouma’s novels all provide this recognizable geographic anchor and constant reference to its ‘wise’ leader, thus making peripheral all other central themes and characters’(80). This study argues that the apparent peripheralness

of the subject of religion lacks substance in a lot of African literature. For instance, Coates and Ouédraogo themselves acknowledge that such issues are central to Kourouma's works and this thesis explores the central role that Islam plays in his work. Ouédraogo himself talks about 'the chunky details' of Kourouma's writing. For this reason my thesis takes up one of them –Islam –and discusses its representation in the works I have chosen for my discussion. Muslim characters are described as liars; confused in the turbulence of the war setting, and as they are 'confronted with a world of their ambitions' they contradict themselves in their religious calling.

In another vein, Richard K. Priebe (2005), commenting on Kourouma's novel, notes that:

The title *Allah Is Not Obligated* comes from the Qur'an and the words are used by the naïve central character as a mantra-like response to all his horrific experience. The model seems to be Voltaire, namely *Candide* and his "best of all possible worlds". Kourouma is brilliant in taking on those who would find refuge in organized religion (Christianity no less than Islam) and those who would idealize African traditions (56).

Priebe's view of Kourouma's attitude to religion enables us to see the way religious characters confront the world of suffering and confusion. Non-religious issues like putting food on the table and making ends meet in society seem forever in conflict with religious precepts. Again, following from Priebe's view we can see a mockery of Islamic characters. To what extent can we consider this a mockery? To say that 'Kourouma is brilliant in taking on those who will take refuge in organized religion...' is to imply that the happenings in the fictional world of Kourouma are so horrendous that not even Islam –or any other religion –is capable of protecting those who put their trust in it. It should be noted here though that Priebe, just as the novel itself reveals, does not mention only one religion but all.

In comparing the hardships that Birahima has to go through to those of Voltaire's *Candide*, Priebe exposes the enormity of the situation which a Muslim child has to

experience, respond to and adapt to. This questions what Islam can do for its followers in the face of other hostile religious and non-religious forces. Kourouma's use of the child who suffers the hardships along with the older people is indicative of the intensity of such suffering in the society in which his novel is set. If an inexperienced and innocent Muslim child should undergo suffering, then we should ask to what extent his Muslim elders help to overcome them.

The central concern of Priebe is violence in *Allah Is Not Obligated*. What he does is investigate how violence features in literature and the community especially after what has become known as the 9/11 disaster. Priebe further comments on the introduction of Birahima to the reality of violence. Birahima thinks that he is leaving Togoballa for a better life through a 'deus ex machina' intervention, which is, the invitation of the supernatural, and the religious into the realities of social life, but worse things rather happen. The supernatural does not support him in his struggles; the Marxist material demands instead dictate his choices. Even though Priebe thinks that Birahima confronts the problem of violence, I find that Birahima's problem is similar to that in Togoballa, except that in Liberia and Sierra Leone he wields guns and kills people, a worse scenario than the Togoballa evils. Therefore it is even ironic, because the message 'in a safe country under the protection of a relative' is but the opposite of his actual predicament. For indeed what he goes through in Liberia and Sierra Leone, with no formal education is a 'miseducation' (John Walsh: 2008), for example, in the wielding of guns and the resultant violence. Birahima does not seem in any way to believe in how Islam can save him from the harsh, rotten and hopeless conditions in which he finds himself. Moreover, many religions in the world cannot be absolved of the problem and blame of violence. Interestingly, the different religions accuse each other of being violent. In Kourouma's novel the three major

religions are caught up in violence which contributes to worsening it. Yet their followers deceive themselves that they are 'good' religious people.

Questions arise on the role Islamic guardians play in the life of the helpless children and other characters including women amidst the horrors of homelessness. For example, Celia McMichael (2002) reports that:

Islam and faith in Allah became an important source of strength. Women recall the war in terms of anger, fear, violence, chaos, loss of trust and social breakdown. The immediacy and horror of the war was evoked through descriptions of people dying of starvation, dead bodies outside people's homes, witnessing murders, family separation, soldiers raping women, children going missing only to be found with their throats slit (183).

In comparing this scene of people experiencing conflict in Somalia with the scenes in Liberia and Sierra Leone in Kourouma's fiction we find that the horrors they endure are similar but the hope that Allah and Islam give the former is absent in the latter. In *Allah Is Not Obligated* Allah is very distant, for which reason the characters engage in all forms of vice to survive. And this is one reason why the narrator asks if Allah is obliged to be fair about the things he does here on earth.

In a related development, though contrary to McMichael's, Christiane Ndiaye (2002) notes that:

children as well as women, in this novel adopt an 'evil' and 'virile' behaviour, brandishing their AK-47s and engaging in killings that are all the more shocking because they seem inconsistent with a child's nature (Ndiaye 2002: 104).

This shows the behaviour of women and children in the face of the difficulties of war. Their religious affiliations are sacrificed in the circumstance of the war. They are out there not to follow Islam –or any other religion –but to survive as they resort to violent behaviour thereby contradicting the faith they hold. Kourouma is vociferous about this in *Allah Is Not Obligated*.

Commenting on the ‘violent’ Muslim child narrator, Vivan Steemers (2012) notes that child soldiers have become very important ‘expendable combat troops’. This shows that war-wrecked African societies have rejected children. Instead of offering them education, they see them as ‘expendable combat troops’. Children are forced to commit the worst atrocities so that the interest of the avaricious political power seekers and material minded religious men and women will be met. The realities of the conflict between the interest of the child narrator and that of the greedy adult guardian are made more palpable in Kourouma’s use of language, to reflect the complexity of the tension.

Steemers, referring to Djian (1995) on the complexities of the realities, takes up Kourouma’s own words: ‘it is the search for words that make me suffer the most; there are too many African realities that are indescribable in French.’(41) And that is why Kourouma uses the indigenized French in his narrative so that he will be able to tell the complex realities of the African in a less difficult way. In my view one of ‘the complex realities’ is how Muslims and other religious people react to non-religious issues. A part of the complex realities that the indigenized French has to confront is the tension between Islam and the material –a tension which the English translation has also not been able to solve.

In addition to the argument in favour of the material essence Akin Adesokan, (2012) commenting on the socio-political situation, a part of the material in the novel, opines that:

the child-soldier novel is surely a creature of the continent’s complicated wars, which are in turn produced by perennial struggles with natural resources, the international arms trade and a modern history of unequal ethnic and social relations. But it is also a creature of the market: “a preteen child” given a Kalashnikov, minimal rations of food, a small supply of dope, and a tiny wage” (thus goes the blurb description of Birahima, the novel’s protagonist.) It is easily recognizable within the matrix of the

commodity form in which certain kinds of post-colonial reality find their niche. *Allah Is Not Obligated* differs from the other works in the genre in the way it straddles the two fields, reflexively combining certain accents of Francophone writing with the humanist politics of Kourouma the post-colonial writer (12).

The complicated wars are triggered by the socio-economic and political struggles facing the characters. The protagonist child narrator has to confront the struggles ironically not with the power and promise that Islam should offer but the symbol of violence –the A-K 47 Kalashnikov.

Because Adesokan's concern in his essay is the question of audience, to whom Kourouma presents the complexity of the African reality of which Islam is part, he asks,

to whom is Birahima explaining stuff? The answer is obviously the reader. Who is the reader? The answer to this question is not so obvious. With ambiguous reverence for French and the gory details of a series of complicated wars, this rhetorical choice makes it all the easier to think of the novel as a deliberate attempt to reproduce cultural prejudices for the titillation of foreign readers all too familiar with negative images of life at the heart of "African darkness." The intellectual limitations of the narrator, like the emotional innocence of Kambili, becomes the pretext for presenting the complexity of socio-political realities of West Africa as immanent, a word that, he explains, means "that which is inherent, which comes from the very nature of the thing itself (14).

Though Adesokan's concern is the question of audience he does not leave out the socio-political and economic situation in which the novel is set. However, he fails to see the effect of the religious on the situation. The child soldier and narrator thus becomes a creation of the social conditions of the African situation. Adesokan notes that the child as part of the society seems not to have any bright future. I ask what the authorized Muslim elders contribute to giving him a 'good' Islamic upbringing. We find that since 'there is hardly an admirable character in the book', the religious people themselves are not 'good' and cannot impart any goodness to the child. In that case what is the value of the religion they profess allegiance? What image of Islam is

portrayed in this case? Or is it that the turbulent war setting itself makes everything in it including Islam appear turbulent too? These issues present contradiction with Islam's goal of creating 'good' followers.

In addition to the discussion of the problems Kourouma presents in the novel Augustine H. Asaah (2009) notes that, 'as a result of unprecedented migration in our contemporary world, identity related themes, border issues and hybridization have often occupied centre stage in academic and socio-political debates. Not insulated from these socio-cultural currents, African literature has often been a valorized site of displacement-related discourse' (639). These problems, I find, have not been solved by Islam as presented in Kourouma's novel.

He adds that his paper contributes to the above dialogue by looking at the issue on three main points, namely the way Kourouma thematizes Pan-Africanism, deterritorialization and identity. For Asaah, Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*

situates for the first time, the malaise of cross-border life in named countries: Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The context of genocidal warfare, tribal politics, anarchy, and political manipulation provides the author with the chance to chronicle and deplore the failures of the African nation state, the bad faith of West African peace keepers, and the ill-disposition of African leaders to Pan-Africanism (647).

According to Asaah 'a fundamental criticism that can be levelled against Kourouma is that whereas his novels can be read as a negative evaluation of the African post colony, inter-African migration, and the Pan-Africanist project, he does not offer unambiguous messianic messages of hope to challenge and transcend the ambient nexus of distress and anomy that frames his works.'(650). However, on Kourouma's language he observes that the Ivorian author's 'narratives generally convince us of their positive contribution to the dialogue of cultures and the building of bridges across differences thus giving more meaning to the location of life and culture in the

realm of the beyond'(ibid). The problem I find though, is that Islam a part 'of [the] life and culture in the realm of the beyond' of the protagonist narrator and all the other characters offers no 'meaning' and capitulates to the Marxist material realities.

In connection with Kourouma's technique, Susan Gasster-Carrierre (2002) takes a look at Kourouma's choice of setting for the novel. She notes that the war-wrecked setting finds in it a child soldier who 'tells a picaresque, journalistic horror story in which he goes from one encounter to another with warlord, rival warlord diamond smuggler, grigirman(sorcerer), manic priest'(826). This presents an irony of situation. One would have thought that the Muslim guardian by reason of his religion would not be described in this negative fashion. Gasster-Carrierre gives a picture of Birahima in army uniform too big for him and describes the painful life that awaits him at the war front.

Gasster-Carrierre also looks at the language Kourouma uses. She says that 'the language is at first heavily deformed as "le francais de Moussa," the street language of Cote d'Ivoire, while also noting that the child narrator, even though he has had almost no formal education has been given four dictionaries which he regularly consults as he uses strange words in the narration of the story. Gasster-Carrierre also observes that Kourouma's concern in the novel is not on the question of language, as Steemers for example observes. She adds that it mainly concerns the civil wars. She notes that the Muslim child narrator, Birahima, tells the story on two levels: First, "Birahima is a child who is in the middle of the atrocities around him, adds experience to experience, anecdote to anecdote because he does not have the adult's paradigms for a moral understanding of what he is living through" (827). Second, "Birahima tells us that tribal war means strong men gathering as many resources for themselves as possible while the international community does nothing" (ibid).

However, the object of the protagonist's 'epic' journey to Sierra Leone is to keep to his Islamic belief, but the combined forces of the civil wars and his antagonist Muslim guardian would not allow him to pursue his dreams. The material presence found in the realities of the wars rather prevails.

Moreover, Gasster-Carrierre observes that 'the point of view is never one of Africa as victim of the West but rather, insofar as the turmoil of destruction and cruelty can be interpreted, the expectation that an African who comes to power will as much as any other cynic, take advantage of the possibilities in order to amass unlimited wealth'(ibid). This is not dissimilar to Kourouma's EL Hajj's invested power which he corrupts by using his own Muslim nephew as an instrument for making wealth a thing which this discussion shows is of paramount concern to the Muslim characters. This further supports the Marxist Materialist argument, the central basis of this discussion.

Gasster-Carrierre also talks about the structure of *Allah Is Not Obligated* describing it as 'circular'. She explains this to mean that at the end of the story, Birahima begins the story all over again when he is asked a question about his life. She also observes that 'the situation is not parallel but spiral, moving Birahima and Africa with him farther from the hope of real childhood, safety, and justice for which he was searching when he set out from home'(827). I find that she dilates on Kourouma's use of language, politics, and structure of the work but only makes passing references to issues of Islam, a religion that is central to Kourouma's work. I find also that Gasster-Carrierre mentions Birahima's quest for hope, but the desire for hope eludes him even though he has been placed in the 'safe hands' of his Muslim uncle and guardian, Yacouba.

Regarding Islam and its relation with West African culture John Walsh (2008) notes, for example, the blend of the Malinke culture with Islam. He finds that there is a marriage between Islam and African tradition. He compares two Malinke Muslim characters –Camara Laye’s Laye and Ahmadou Kourouma’s Birahima, revealing both differences and similarities between them. The similarity is that they are both little children who are Muslim with African traditional background while the difference is that whereas Laye enjoys a proper Malinke-Islamic family upbringing and formal education, Birahima gets none of it finds himself in the streets with bad language, violence and drug addiction contrary to his Islamic and African traditional upbringing.

Walsh notes that Birahima praises the Malinke culture to which he belongs, painting a good picture of his people in their praying five times a day, as the Qur’an recommends and not in their eating pork or drinking alcohol. However, beautiful though these pictures of Islamic adherence seem, and for all the good impression that the Malinke people and their culture seem to portray, what is not beautiful is the child’s depraved heart and his proclivity for evil even though he knows and believes in the principles of Islam. I ask then whether it is the Islamic dogma that matters or the moral practices in overcoming the forces that seek to conquer the Islamic faith.

Furthermore, Walsh points out that Birahima depicts a post-colonial child who embarks on a journey of ‘miseducation’. But the young Birahima has to struggle with the difficulties and engage in the depraved order of the day of which every character, religious or non-religious, becomes victim. The ‘miseducation’ is Walsh’s way of drawing the attention of the African society to the need to ensure ‘re-education and regeneration’ (Achebe, 1965: 59). It is also Kourouma’s way of revealing the chaotic situation in the world of the novel. Children should not become child soldiers but proper and disciplined school children with knowledge of their inherited African

culture. But Birahima lacks both a proper Islamic education and a good understanding of his own Malinke (African) culture.

Walsh adds that Birahima's 'travelling companion is Yacouba, a marabout who turns out to be a con man. Together, they are a pair of survivors, individuals who eke out an existence in the margins of corruption and abusive power' (Walsh 2008:192). My view is that they eke out an existence at the expense of Islam's ideals, engaging in all forms of evil. Walsh also notes that "... as a collective their identities splinter into several aliases that allow them to move fluidly between groups. While Birahima is a street child without fear and beyond reproach, 'the small soldier', Yacouba is also valued as a 'powerful grigri man against hissing bullets' (105). *Allah Is Not Obligated's* built-in dictionary defines a grigri man as a juju man. He adds that by endowing Yacouba with multiple roles, Kourouma brings to light the power that the marabout has in contemporary West African Muslim societies. The protection he offers also gives him a certain amount of security in the face of superstitious warlords but this foster care keeps Birahima on the path to self-destruction –Yacouba as a "miseducator" (Walsh 2008:192). However, Yacouba is a Muslim, a powerful El Hajj, Kourouma tells us, except that Yacouba contradicts his Islamic religion by behaving more like a juju man than a Muslim. He is rather a powerful 'grigri man' against hissing bullets and not a powerful El Hajj. This further shows how he contradicts his Islamic belief.

Walsh continues with the view that:

Birahima is a young West African picaro or trickster, a depraved child whose quest for stability and redemption is always deferred: he will never be united with his aunt. Unlike the traditional *bildungsroman* quest, which takes the young hero through a secure bourgeois society, the itinerary of *Allah N'est Pas Obligé* takes its tragicomic characters through societies that have been torn apart. In the place of a hero to build a

meaningful life, we read Birahima's vulgar disdain for everything around him as the hopelessness of a child abandoned to ethnic warfare' (ibid).

Here we find that Birahima's Muslim guardian has abandoned him causing him to cast doubt on Islam. Walsh says that 'the novel itself focuses on death at the expense of the protagonist's formation. In *Allah N'est Pas Obligé*, Kourouma explores the interaction between homelessness and refuge; ways of marginalized living that are the tragic consequences of war' (ibid). I argue in addition to Walsh's that the 'interaction' does not exclude Islam whose influence on the war setting is made palpable in the representative Muslim characters.

In a related development, Nelly Lecomte, Dana Rufolo and Marie-France Bauvir (2005) observe that *Allah Is Not Obligated* '...is set within the context of conflict with Islam. Magic which derives from animistic thought is being used unscrupulously by men who are willing to exploit the ancient beliefs of their people.' (198). Kourouma creates a tension amidst the chaos of the war setting, and Islam –Peace.

Lecomte, Rufolo and Bauvir look at the political and sociological advantage of the use of fetish power by characters in the war setting. They note that the people's belief in it is very strong because they think that it can get them the security they need in the turbulent war front. They describe the makers of the fetish symbols as 'false magicians [who] possess an active imagination that allows them to convince scientifically ignorant people that they can control and manipulate natural forces' (198). They add that magical thought 'is always present in traditional black African society. Therefore magic plays an important role in this [Kourouma's] work. Its influence is felt everywhere.' (ibid).

They describe magic as “ ‘a kind of last resort to situations where a large part has been left to fate, or where man feels insecure, where he is exposed to danger, war

illness, or to severe climatic conditions’... magic is also necessary for the healing of illnesses”(200) and ‘we have to keep beliefs –and fears –going . It is the mission of the sorcerer. But does he only realize his trickery? Isn’t the use of magic just a way to make money? The sorcerer, Yacouba decorates himself with fetishes, like greenish fangs, so as to enter completely into magical thought and to impress people around him. In the same way, Balla covers himself with amulets to appear more credible’ (203). In all, the central concern of Lecomte, Rufolo and Bauvir has been on the way magic is used to manipulate people to extort money from them.

I find in the observations made by Lecomte, Rufolo and Bauvir that Islam at one point excludes the animist and at another actually accepts it. This situation creates confusion about the position of Islam on magic and animism. I look at the way some characters parade as Muslims and yet yoke themselves with Christianity and animism to corrupt themselves by placing their material interests first. There is also the view that Muslim characters practise syncretism with the animist and Christian characters to contradict its doctrine.

Lecomte, Rufolo and Bauvir add that:

It seems that magic and religion are mutually exclusive. Animists make use of ritual practices; it is not the case for Muslims. The two communities do not want to mix... the Muslim community even despises the animist one. Before colonization, animists were still naked. They are the true autochthones; they do not know Allah and are nasty. Muslims consider them as savage and primitive people... they are worshippers, nonbelievers, fetishists savages and sorcerers. But actually religions mix with each other and result in syncretism (203).

This observation made in the foregoing forms part of the discussion I seek to undertake in this work. The case in which Islam accepts other religions at some points and excludes them in others is brought up and discussed in the war environment that

Kourouma places his avaricious Islamic characters. This creates a paradox and gives a bad reflection of Islam.

On Ali it has been observed that he is still a relatively new writer and there are not many relevant critical works on *The Prophet Of Zongo Street*. Therefore, I hope that my discussion of Islam in the text as Islam confronts the social, economic and political forces will contribute to criticism on it. However, the feature of Ali's "Mallam Sile" story in the *New York Times* (2005) magazine marked Ali's breakthrough in the literary world. Ali also belongs to the West African oral and short story tradition, and relevant criticism on Islam in some literature throws light on Ali's literary style and its implications for Islam.

Carine Bourget (2010) reviews Donald R. Wehrs (2008) on some African works written between the 1950s and the 1990s. In this study Wehrs "directly and robustly engages Islamic ethical critique of egoism and idolatry" (184). Commenting on Wehrs' work Bourget notes some inadequacies especially with its lack of Islamic sources to support the arguments. Bourget finds for example that 'prayer' is used instead of the Arab Islamic vocabulary of the "*shahada*", a pillar of Islam. Although Bourget finds some things wrong with Wehrs' work she considers the entire work as one "that sheds a new light on... literature"(185) in her discussion of Laye's *African Child*, Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence* Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* among others.

Bourget's view ends on the observation that "Wehrs' work is a valuable addition to the growing body of scholarship analyzing Islam as more than a sociological feature in African literature" (Bourget:185). There is the need however to add more to this

scholarship on Islam and my discussion on Ali is an important contribution to the endeavour.

Mahir Saul (2006), on Islam's relation with African culture, refers to a 'chasm' between what he considers as 'traditional or authentically African and Islam' (3). Saul notes that this 'chasm' causes anthropologists and other scholars to ignore the important contribution of Islam to the life of West Africans. Saul advises that scholars "break the 'we' 'they' dichotomy between Islam and African traditions by creating a new cosmopolitanism" (ibid). But we find in Ali's Afromadiyyan character a rejection of any 'cosmopolitanism' because he emphasizes his African tradition and religion while rejecting Islam and other 'foreign' religions. In *The Prophet of Zongo Street* Ali's characterization of Kumi as a 'separatist' and 'exclusivist' of other religions – Islam and Christianity – supports the divide. Kumi is characterized as an African traditionalist who does not compromise his 'new' faith as a neo-traditionalist. He is characterized as a non-conformist, unwilling to compromise his stance in acceptance of any 'cosmopolitanism' with Islam or Christianity. Kumi's behaviour is the direct opposite of Saul's suggestion that scholars who discuss Islam should "situate West Africa in [their] imagination, by putting Islam near the center of [their] training and thinking – as a major ingredient of West Africa's historical heritage, and not as a 'foreign' incursion"(4).

He adds "that Islam served as a 'template and vehicle of exchange of many traits between West Africa, the Mediterranean, Europe and the Middle East' (ibid). This according to him, created a lot of 'meaning' not only for Muslims but for people of other religions. This observation made by Saul is raised in Ali's *The Prophet Of Zongo Street* in which Ali tackles the issue both with a rejection and acceptance. He rejects it in Kumi, his Afromadiyyan character; Suf-yan, the renegade Muslim

narrator, who is now an atheist. However, there seems to be some acceptance in his ridiculous but pious Muslim character, Mallam Sile. The level of rejection however overshadows the acceptance in the pungent arguments Kumi makes in support of African Traditional Religion and a vehement rejection of Islam and other foreign religions.

On the issue of acceptance or rejection of Islam, Novian Whitsitt (2002) writing on Balaraba Yakubu's (1987, 1990 i, 1990 ii) literary oeuvres, speaks of the acceptance of literature in predominantly Muslim communities in Nigeria. The concern of the *soyaya*, (sagas of love and marital relationships literature) Whitsitt observes, is love which creates a controversy among members of the Muslim community. This controversy is highlighted in Ali's work in the sense in which his Muslim community approaches issues of love and marriage with public rage and contempt. The farcical public sex scene which is expected to authenticate the veracity of Ali's Muslim character, Rafique's potency, attests to the mockery of the Muslim characters on their attitude to issues of sex and marriage.

In a related sense, Whitsitt looks at the impact of Yakubu's writing in ensuring a good moral upbringing among the young readers. Whitsitt notes that: 'in order to clarify the ethical agendas, numerous writers include prefaces that unequivocally explicate the thematic direction and instructive nature on various levels. Writers without exception, feel a sense of social responsibility in advising a youth confused by the volatile social climate. Readers confirm that the literature has had the desired effect, claiming that the books are beneficial on several levels (120). Whitsitt's observation of the impact of the books on the Kano Muslim community is similar to what Ali does in his work though most of the Muslim characters are presented in very ludicrous fashion. The

‘social climate’ of the Zongo community is also tangled with the issues of the demands of their religion and their personal material interest. Another issue that Ali raises is the problems women face in male dominated Muslim societies. This issue is also addressed in Yakubu’s works, and Whitsitt notes that:

the single most important consideration in the construction of Hausa feminism is the significance of Islam given that the religious faith colors virtually every aspect of social relations. Writers have attempted to negotiate the tensions between cultural/religious tradition and the elements of modernization by identifying themselves as Muslim writers who do not see these forces as incompatible entities. Regardless of the religious veracity of their claims, writers have been condemned as espousing un-Islamic teachings when condemning forced marriage, discouraging polygamy or encouraging women to further their education at the expense of the tradition of seclusion (ibid).

Ali, as with Yakubu, raises these issues in his work. In Ali’s work the women characters are in a revolt against the men. Their role in the Muslim society does not suggest subservience but power and control. The Muslim women characters in Ali’s book relegate the Islamic religion to favour their material interest, and they are not puppets of their male counterparts. The laws of Islam to which they remain obedient are overturned so as to liberate themselves from the long established male dominance and Islam’s support thereof. Whitsitt adds that “more than any writer, Balaraba Ramat Yakubu positions herself within this contingent of Islamic feminism” (ibid). Ali, a male writer, also invests his Muslim women characters with a lot of power in his work and by his style, adopts a male feminist attitude to the plight of women even when it means compromising their religion.

Whitsitt ends her discussion with the observation that “the literature’s defining syncretic nature operates on an artistic level as Hausa oral tradition and contemporary romance formulas amalgamate in a neoteric fashion, but the syncretic essence is better personified by the ideological admixture of seemingly opposed principles”(14).

In Ali's *The Prophet Of Zongo Street* the oral story telling fashion that he uses carries a multiple of issues much like the observation Whitsitt makes from Yakubu's works. Ali's religious imagery and language also reveal an essential literary element which allows us to comprehend his central themes. His religious imagery portrays a concern with the impact of religion on his characters' socio-economic and political life and how they each respond to them based on their own Marxist material interest.

Finally, I find that the various critics discuss violence, children, politics and language but though Islam plays a central role in the works, they do not address its ramifications when it confronts the secular world. Therefore, my work seeks to fill the gap and add to the other discussions. It recognizes the Islamic religion as a major subject and captures how the authors use literary devices to reveal the conflict and contradiction that occur as Islam finds itself in the material world, the socio-political and economic settings, of their works.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ISLAM IN *ALLAH IS NOT OBLIGED*

#### 3.0 Introduction

Toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the very early stage of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the political upheaval that hit Africa, especially the West African sub region demanded that someone write about it. Remy Ourdan (2001) writes that child victims of the Somalian civil war entreated Kourouma to write about children. Kourouma responded positively to the Somali children's entreaty and came out with *Allah Is Not Obligated*. But Kourouma did not write solely about children because it was the political atmosphere of the time that moved the children to make that request. His work therefore is heavily political: It exposes Africa's political tyrants of the times – Houphouet Boigny (Kourouma's greatest political foe), Muamar Al Quathafi, Blaise Compaore, Samuel Doe, Charles Taylor, Prince Johnson, El Hajj Koroma, Foday Sankoh and others, all of whom he presents as characters in his novel. He exposes these power drunk leaders by using heavy satire. The truth in the political mayhem is that Africa's leaders of that time had become so drunk with power that everything else had to be subordinated to their inordinate quest for political power. The conflict that sets the plot of the novel rolling is that a group of political leaders desires to hold on to power while another group yearns to snatch same from the hands of those who hold on to it. Given this situation, it is not surprising that the plot is packed with turbulent action from start to finish.

The setting Kourouma chooses is the Liberia-Sierra Leone stormy civil war zone and era. The war actually started in Monrovia on 24<sup>th</sup> December, 1989. From Liberia the war, having led to a lot of political complications, had spilled into Sierra Leone,

thanks to the greedy warlord, Charles Taylor. Heavily political though the novel is, Kourouma's ability to handle other sub themes along with the political cannot be ignored. Among them are issues related to wealth, children, the elderly, violence, women, language, and religion (Islam, Christianity, African Traditional Religion, magic, and animism). My discussion focuses on one of the sub themes –Islam –with the view to investigating how Kourouma represents it. It finds out whether the manner in which he does the representation paints a positive or negative picture of the religion. To expose conflicts and contradictions, Islam has been pitted against, socio-economic and political realities to find out how the religion responds to them. Islam is also read in its relation and responses to other religions –Christianity, and African Traditional Religion, and whether Islam excludes or agrees with them in the war setting of Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*. It can also be argued that Kourouma plants the various religions in the war zone as a 'litmus test' to see how each of them would respond to it and vice versa. I find that largely because of the extreme trials that characterize war settings none of the religions passes the test.

My aim in this chapter therefore, is to show that Kourouma's attitude to Islam, as with all other religions in his novel, is negative. We will find that unlike Kane, Sow Fall, and Laye who are 'reverents' of Islam, Kourouma, like Ousmane in his atheistic days, and Armah, falls into the group of the 'irreverents'. My discussion focuses on the negative portrayal of Islam in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*.

This chapter also looks at the connection between Islam and violence, the role of the elderly in Islam, the way the elderly in Islam treat children in contemporary society, the role of women in Islam, and Islam and politics. The discussion is being done taking cognizance of the way Kourouma represents Islam in his work; that his Islamic characters are not presented 'with an aura of deep reverence,' (Cham, 1985: 458) and

'reverent apologia' (462), but 'irreverence,' 'caustic savaging' and 'apostasy' (ibid). The chapter therefore posits that Kourouma represents Islam 'radically negatively' and the way he does that is what I attempt to show.

### **3.1 Islam, Wealth and Marxist Aesthetics**

A central issue that Kourouma raises in *Allah Is Not Obligated* is the inordinate desire most of his characters including the Muslim ones have for money and how this inordinate desire affects their religious faith and their place in society. The extent to which many of the Islamic characters are involved in the desperate search for money either to survive or to make themselves extremely rich for vainglorious reasons is addressed in the war setting in which Kourouma places them. This craving for money is mocked by Kourouma as he presents his Muslim characters in such a way that they engage in all kinds of vice among which are wanton killing, stealing, abandoning or subduing their religious convictions, deceit and corruption, all these contradicting the moral values of the Islamic religion. Kourouma paints a gloomy picture of Islam when he situates his Muslim characters in the war-torn zone probably as a testing ground to see how Islam, represented by the Muslim characters, responds to it. Supposedly holy Muslim characters who should paint a good image of Islam are often found either using Islam itself as a vehicle to amass wealth or contravening the rules of the religion to do likewise.

Islam is often blended with, or subordinated to juju power. The Oxford Advanced Learner's 'Dictionary (2006) defines juju as : (i) an object used in West African magic, (ii) a type of magic in West Africa. The same dictionary also defines magic as 'a secret power of appearing to make impossible things happen by saying words or doing special things. It is closely related to black magic which is believed to use the

power of the devil in order to do evil'. A key Malinke Muslim character, Yacouba, gets his money from the desperate masses that follow him, and often he succeeds in swindling them. Kourouma reveals that Muslim characters' love for money is greater than their love for Allah. This is evident, for example, in the corrupt way in which Yacouba comes into wealth. But, he suddenly gets bankrupt and does everything including subverting his own El-Hajj status by taking up the position of a juju man. Kourouma presents El Hajj Yacouba in such a way that he is more of a juju man than a Muslim, thereby causing Yacouba to contradict himself and misrepresent Islam. In so doing Kourouma satirizes the Muslim characters and negatively represents the Islamic religion. Although the Muslim characters' bad behaviour could be due to human nature their own kin argue that Muslims are perfect. However, Kourouma's mockery of these characters exposes the lie in their claim.

All through the novel Yacouba describes himself as 'a powerful grigiman'. From Kourouma's built-in dictionary " a 'grigri' is a protective amulet, often a piece of paper inscribed with magical incantations kept in a small leather purse which is tied above the elbow or around the neck" (8). Only on a few occasions when he wants his Islamic identity to show, depending on the circumstances, does he refer to himself as a powerful Muslim grigiman.

Kourouma's use of Birahima, Yacouba's ward, exposes Kourouma's doubts about the future of the innocent child as he gets 'mentored' (here used ironically and sarcastically) by a character as rotten as Yacouba. Birahima therefore becomes a victim of the evil machinations of Yacouba even though Yacouba is chosen by the Malinke Muslim family to the rejection of the animist, Balla. By their standards Balla

does not qualify for the guardianship role because they fear that he might be a bad influence on the young Muslim, Birahima. The irony of this is that it is Yacouba who persuades Saydou to try making a living in Liberia because in Yacouba's words:

In those countries people were dying like flies, and when people are dying like flies, a marabout that can pull a chicken out of his sleeves can make piles of money, and heaps of dollars (42).

That is the voice of the 'holy' El Hajj providing us with a very interesting materialist premise from which he argues and justifies his desire to go to the war front. Straightway and contrary to the Malinke Muslim family's expectation that he remain a faithful Muslim guardian, Yacouba shows a magic-infested Islamic identity, in identifying himself as a marabout and juju man. This confirms Harrow's (1991) input on the blend of Islam with myths and African traditions. Kourouma's mockery of Yacouba is a way Kourouma negatively represents Islam.

The setting Kourouma has chosen is a war front in which lots of people lose their lives and property. But, he places his Muslim character, Yacouba, in this same situation to serve as an opportunity for him to amass wealth by foul means. This shows a criticism of El Hajj who is scarcely referred to as a good Muslim, but rather often as a 'powerful grigiman' who only takes interest in seeing people go through difficulties to provide him the chance to satisfy his money making interest. Here, Kourouma's way of portraying his Islamic characters' approach to money can be seen in the choices the characters make – Allah worship or money worship.

Yacouba's behaviour makes us question his position as the 'best' Muslim capable of taking care of Birahima and confronting political, social and economic problems. This further makes it evident that Islam capitulates to the forces of reality, and gives credence to the Marxist arguments of this thesis. Yacouba bends Islamic doctrine to

meet the demands of the socio-economic and political world. The picture Kourouma paints of Yacouba in connection with the latter's search for wealth is a very ugly one. Yacouba is a character whose mind is more captured by wealth than by Islam – the religion that makes him qualified to become Birahima's guardian so that he will impart Islamic principles to Birahima. But, Yacouba's wealth-enslaved mind prevents him from raising Birahima in any positively significant way except when the training is itself significantly immoral, corrupt and evil. Yacouba's attitude causes Birahima to think that the best way to make money is the Kalashnikov AK-47, a major symbol representing violence. And this is confirmed by other child soldiers engaged in the same act of violence. Two different ways of making wealth are seen in the two Muslim characters –the El Hajj (Yacouba) largely through magic, the young Muslim boy (Birahima) largely through violence seen in the firearm he carries. Kourouma therefore invites judgement on the influence of the elderly on the young in how to acquire wealth. Walsh's term 'miseducation' comes to mind in the manner in which Yacouba corrupts the young brain – Birahima. For, he causes Birahima's mind to defect from the culture of peace, of a good Malinke Islamic upbringing, and of acquiring a good Islamic education as the Malinke family in Togoballa wishes for him.

Yacouba's avariciousness causes him to renege on his acceptance to take good care of Birahima. It is a shirking of responsibility and a breach of trust. It is also a sign of failure and of acting in such a way that it is the material and not the spiritual need that is important. The religious and spiritual are themselves used to meet the demands of the socio-economic and political. That is why the spiritual needs of the religious characters are subordinated to the physical. Yacouba's failure to fulfil his guardianship role reminds us of Althusser's interpellation, only that in this

interpellation, the positive response, unlike Peter whom Althusser refers to, is replaced with a negative behaviour that only emphasizes wealth, after the promise to take good care of Birahima has been made. This behaviour does not paint any good picture of Yacouba's position as an El Hajj, the Muslim title which the characters of Malinke Muslim community consider and therefore leave their young Muslim child, Birahima, in his care.

The inordinate desire for money also causes all the Muslim characters in *Allah Is Not Obligated* to commit 'haram' by attempting to yoke themselves with other religions – Christianity, Traditional Religion, and magic. This contradicts Muslim belief that Islam is the only true revealed religion and that all others are “Kaffir banzas” – condemned, rejected, and paganistic. Kourouma therefore exposes his Islamic characters' hypocrisy, spiritual whoredom and denial of their seemingly unshakeable Islamic convictions when confronted with other religions and Marxist non-religious social forces.

### 3.2 Islam and Violence: the Nexus and Paradox

This section discusses the way Kourouma connects Islam and other religions with violence. Many religions in global history have been involved with violence which contradicts the peace they are actually supposed to bring about. The contradiction to Islam's and other religions' claim to peace can be found in how Kourouma presents all his religious characters as violent in the Liberia-Sierra Leone war setting. This discussion of Islam and violence is intended to show another of Kourouma's way of representing Islamic characters negatively in *Allah Is Not Obligated*.

On religion and violence, Mark Twain (2010) notes that:

Man is a Religious Animal. He is the only Religious Animal. He is the only animal that has the True Religion – several of them. He is the only animal that loves his neighbour as himself and cuts his throat, if his theology isn't straight. He has made a graveyard of the globe in trying his honest best to smooth his brother's path to happiness and heaven (32).

Twain's mockery of man's abuse of religion is made evident in man's proclivity for religion-inspired violence through history. Other religions' and secular society's haste in associating Islam with violence, is however refuted. Roger Boase (2005) notes that 'Islam has become for many people a synonym for fanaticism and terrorism' but Boase objects to this by saying that:

There is nothing inherently violent about Islam as a religion, rather as anyone with any knowledge of Arabic will tell you, the word Islam which is generally referred to as submission to the will of God derives from the same root as Salam, 'peace' ” (xvii).

Boase adds that war in Islam is only under certain circumstances a sense of duty and therefore cannot be described as holy, and that even when it occurs it does not sanction the killing of women and children. In Kourouma's fiction however, boys, girls, women, men, politicians, warlords, Muslims and Christians all kill. In fact everybody kills everybody. Where are the religions—Islam, Christianity, and African

Traditional Religion to stop this evil? Kourouma shows through his religious characters that religion is incapable of confronting the problems of violence in society since it is itself part of the problem. That is why every one of the characters is a victim of the violence.

War may be associated with the sense of duty argument Islam gives and which Boase cites in support of. In the reality of the events of the text we find that if anyone is too pure a Muslim or too pure a Christian, and there seem to be none in *Allah Is Not Obligated*, their social survival needs will not be met in the environment of war. Therefore, in Kourouma's fictional world of *Allah Is Not Obligated* war itself becomes a tool for meeting one's needs; it is an occasion for plunder and looting, a materialistic move but unfortunately infested with evil. A case like this is a contradiction in terms. In ensuring peace and material sustenance for oneself must someone else die? And how can Muslim characters preach peace when they do otherwise?

On the misconception of the jihad, John Bowen (2005) cites Sayyed Hossein Nasr (1987:28) as saying that: 'Its translation into 'holy war' combined with the erroneous notion of Islam prevalent in the West as the 'religion of the sword' has helped eclipse its inner and spiritual significance.' Clarifying the issue Boase explains that a jihad is a fight against external forces like ignorance and injustice and the external forces of evil and ego problems. According to him these are what a jihad is meant to support. In defense of his argument on Islam's use of force; Boase excludes self-defense and the defense of religious freedom itself. He continues that but for the use of force in global religious history such things as: 'Monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques in which God's name is much remembered, would surely have been destroyed by now' (Quran 22:40).

This is to argue that Islam and all the other religions in the world cannot be absolved from the blame of war in religious history, for it is war itself that has been the foundation of many religions. What Boase has said may show a support for war, but he himself has said that war is not the solution to religious misunderstanding and incompatibility. He admonishes that whenever the chance comes for peace, Muslims are advised to opt for that to encourage forgiveness and mutual coexistence. The big question is what if you cannot find peace in Kourouma's war-torn Liberia and Sierra Leone? And what happens when prominent Muslim characters take advantage of war itself to achieve their selfish ends? This is something that Kourouma considers very disturbing and therefore addresses in *Allah Is Not Obliged*. The application of violence in Kourouma's war setting supports the self-defense argument and seeks to test how Islamic characters respond to violence since Islam represents peace and submission to the will of Allah.

Boase thinks that it is a fallacy for people to think that if there were no religions there would be no wars in the world. Citing Jonathan Sacks (2002) he notes that: 'If religion is not part of the solution it will certainly be part of the problem' (xviii). He adds that: 'The present recourse to violence throughout the world is symptomatic of a general moral crisis, a spiritual bankruptcy and increasing social injustice' (xviii). We therefore question the response of Islamic characters to violence as they contradict themselves when it comes to the very essence of Islam –peace –especially when El Hajj Yacouba's dream is to profit from the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. For El Hajj Yacouba the longer the war goes on the better the opportunity for him to make money. The heavy presence of these social evils among many of the characters in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obliged* supports Boase's contention. I argue that though the response to violence is not due to imperfections in Islam itself as a religion, but to

the imperfect human vehicles, if Islam is thought of as a human invention then it can receive part of the imperfections since imperfect humans cannot create perfect institutions. Flaws in existence present existential contradictions that religion has proved incapable of overcoming. And, even if we think of religion as a divine invention we will find that both Kourouma and Ali portray that not even Allah can be fair. If so who else is or should?

Prince Hassan bin Talal (2005) laments the way the 21<sup>st</sup> century began with religious unrest. Yet he thinks that the century ‘has also seen a great increase in exchanges across cultural and spiritual borders’ (xv). It therefore comes as no surprise that such religious issues that border on violence feature strongly in some 21<sup>st</sup> century novelistic writings such as Kourouma’s and the short story work of Ali with a view to investigating the position of religion[in our case Islam] on this social evil. Bin Talal adds that developing countries (which include the Liberian and Sierra Leonean settings employed by Kourouma) have many different or other serious problems in so far as the new trends are concerned. He thinks that issues such as the ‘brain drain’ suggested links between poverty and violence and struggles for independence advising that the world become wary because these trends in the developing world (of which West Africa is part) must get to the entire world or be ‘prepared for unexpected changes to come’ (xv). In the local African context in Kourouma’s fictional world Birahima leaves Togoballa to seek a better life in Liberia and Sierra Leone but gets the opposite. Kourouma’s young Birahima’s brain ends up infested with violence. For Yacouba, however, he has already argued that he is going to Liberia and Sierra Leone to profit from the political violence that has infested the two countries.

In another vein bin Talal continues that ‘scholarship and knowledge, reason and experience, are powerful tools for building bridges across the divisions between

peoples' assumptions and education. Still, once bridges are built they serve no purpose unless people are persuaded that they can benefit from them' (xvi). In Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* Muslim characters build 'bridges' across Islam, Christianity, Animism and magic to engage in the evils of war, contrary to the peace essence of Islam, to satisfy the survival needs. The need to give respect to all manner of religious faith is very much emphasized in life. Bin Talal calls on all to look upon the need for respect with all the wisdom available to them to ensure peace and harmony something without which no human activity will thrive. Giving respect to other religions is not a problem in *Allah Is Not Obligated* because in it the religious and non-religious characters easily mix; something which in real life, is not easy to do. The mix exposes conflict as Islam confronts various social difficulties. Ironically though, the blend is bent on engaging in the worst forms of evil.

Kourouma makes violence a central concern probably also because throughout global history, Islam and other religions have been involved in various forms of violence leading to the death and maiming of many. Kourouma's work exposes the problems violence causes to religious and political institutions in Africa.

John Kelsay (1993: 1) notes that "over the last thirty years perhaps no issue in religious ethics has attracted more consistent attention than the use of force in war". This refers to the period before what has become known as the 9/11 disaster. But concerns about violence have become even more prominent after the 9/11 disaster especially when the Al Qaeda movement accepted responsibility for that instance of violence. The ironic nicety that Kourouma portrays about Islam here is that Yacouba is an El-Hajj whose words and intended action reveal him not as a man of peace (the essence of Islam) but as a man of war, the inferred contrary. Kourouma, in El Hajj Yacouba, paints a very bad picture of Islam concerning the problem of violence. He is

portrayed as an Islamic character who takes advantage of violence to meet his materialistic ends, not the spiritual (Islamic) demands.

Kourouma's presentation of El Hajj Yacouba and Birahima is apparently indicative of Islam's connection with violence and as a result contradicting its essence; the essence being submission to the will of Allah, and peace. It could be argued however that in a turbulent war situation as this, carrying arms may not be a good enough reason to associate Islam with violence especially when Kourouma's narrator, Birahima, says that it is civil wars that cause that, and adds "That's tribal wars for you" (135). This is to argue that but for the civil wars they would not carry arms. However, the reason Birahima adduces in "it is civil wars that does that" is an escape to excuses as men whose minds are full of peace would definitely not carry arms if it is not meant to negate the peace claims of Islam. Also, it is Kourouma's literary dexterity employed to show the irony and the lie in the statement since the two characters seem to forget that the original intention of Yacouba is to profit thereby and not to propagate his Islamic leanings. This is additional evidence of Kourouma's 'caustic savaging' of Islam in his Muslim characters' involvement in war to show contradictions.

The whole atmosphere of mayhem in which Kourouma sets the work is a testing ground for Islam to prove its essence by revealing that its followers really submit to the will of Allah and represent peace. However, they fail. This is the case because the original purpose of El Hajj Yacouba is not to use his Muslim cum 'grigri' power to ensure peace but to provide some protection and make money. In his words: "I am a grigriman, a grigriman. I can make powerful grigris to protect people from whistling bullets (9)" El Hajj Yacouba implicitly denies his faith, and connects the Islamic religion with violence. Even if El Hajj Yacouba were a 'powerful grigriman'

he would use this to change the minds of the fighters to stop the war than providing protection for victims thereof and hoping that the war continues. Also, the statement he makes here does not promote his religion, Islam, but the 'grigri', thereby hiding his seemingly true Islamic identity and at the same time implying that Islam has not a sufficient enough power to deal with the problems of life. Birahima looks upon his guardian, El Hajj Yacouba, as a man who hides guns in the frills of his bubu, the same way he, Birahima, does. Kourouma's ridicule of Islamic characters and their claim to peace is all the more intense here. The question that goes to El Hajj Yacouba is why he does not go to the war front to ensure peace but rather to take advantage of it. El Hajj Yacouba contradicts himself by hiding arms in his boubou. Because of this we question his claim to providing protection: What is the use of the gun except to argue that it is that which gives protection and not the Islam and 'grigri' he displays? El Hajj Yacouba's behaviour is worrying especially when the Malinke Muslim family saw him as a true representation of Islam and entrusted him with the guardianship of Birahima and rejecting the fetish priest, Balla.

Another way Kourouma exposes violence in Islam is how he relates the Islamic religion with other religions. Kourouma presents Yacouba as a propagator of violence in Yacouba's fixing of 'protective grigris' for followers of other religions. Believing this, the other non-Islamic religious characters, (typical among them the Catholic priest Colonel Papa le Bon and the hybrid [nun, Muslim, animist] Sister Hadja Gabrielle Aminata) stockpile arms for themselves thinking that they can themselves engage in armed conflicts without getting harmed. This is one way in which El Hajj Yacouba, now essentially a 'grigriman', causes harm not only to himself and Islam but also to all the other religions, and thereby associates them with violence. The

replacement of Malinke Islamic upbringing with the infusion of violence in the mentality of the young Birahima exposes Yacouba's shirking of his responsibility to lead Birahima safely to his aunt, Mahan.

Once this discussion has been on violence the question that comes to mind is what happens to peace. It can therefore be argued that Kourouma's Yacouba is privileging war and rejecting peace. Kourouma exposes this unfortunate situation in which Islam comes into conflict with violence and contradicts the claim to its essence, that of peace and submission to the will of Allah.

### **3.3 Islam and the Elderly Characters: the Parody of Morals**

This section discusses the way the elderly contribute to painting a bad image of Islam. The portrayal of the elderly in Kourouma's novel is another important contribution to the establishment of the conflict and contradictions that result from Islam's contact with secular society and other non-Islamic religious groups. Kourouma's use of Birahima's mother, Maman, is also revelatory of conflicts and contradictions. He uses Maman's deteriorating health to expose the problems. Maman's health status requires that an expert attend to her. Unfortunately, and contrary to Islamic ideals, a 'healer' whose beliefs are opposite to Islam's is employed by Maman's Malinke Muslim family to heal her. A description of Balla, the healer, will show the contrast well:

Balla was a kaffir – that's what you call someone who refuses to believe in Islam and keeps his grigris... Balla refused to burn his false idols, so he wasn't a Muslim, he didn't perform the five daily prayers, or fast one month every year. The day he dies, no Muslim is allowed to go to his funeral, and they are not allowed to bury his body in the Muslim cemetery. And strictly speaking, nobody is allowed to eat the meat of any animal whose throat he slits (8).

Yet, to the young protagonist's mind the 'Kaffir' Balla has been blessed by Allah:

There was me [Birahima] and there was the marabout, hunter and healer, Balla. Balla was Maman's healer. Balla was a great guy and totally extraordinary. He knew all

these countries and other stuff. Allah had given him incredible destinies and opportunities (7, 8).

The young Muslim Birahima believes that the fetish priest, Balla, is a good man, yet a somewhat different opinion is what the elderly in the Malinke Muslim family have of Balla. Because of the belief that Balla is an acknowledged and accomplished healer, and that this skill was, as we learn from the quotation above, given to him by Allah, the elders, pushed to the wall by Maman's deteriorating health, employ his services. Yet, one and at the same time they contradict themselves by seeing him as a fetish priest. In spite of the very un-Islamic description of Balla he is the same person the Malinke Muslim elders contract to become Maman's healer and next husband thereby contradicting their Islamic religion. Their attitude to Balla is hypocritical.

To further add to the contradiction and expose the elders' hypocrisy, Birahima, the narrator, points out that:

No one was allowed near Balla's hut, but actually at night everyone went to his hut. Some people even went during the day, because Balla practiced sorcery, native medicine, magic and a million other extravagant customs (8).

The double standards adopted by the Malinke Muslim community, renders their behaviour questionable. From the foregoing paragraph there is an implicit suggestion that the elders think that Islam is incapable of healing Maman's disease. That, it is the contrary power in animism, idolatry, magic, that is capable of healing. And the Muslim community represented in the above quotation by 'everyone' to keep consulting the 'kaffir' Balla is suggestive of their acceptance of the powerlessness of Islam in solving problems. It also reveals contradictions with Islam's order for faithfulness. It follows also from the quotation that the elders contribute to subordinating Islam to magical powers, to serve their physical, material and pragmatic interests. So what it suggests is that if the opposite, contradictory, antagonistic,

animist, non-Islamic, hell-bound religion helps solve their problems, they would rather sacrifice Islam to their survival needs because Islam is incapable of solving their problems. Kourouma therefore exposes their weakness of faith because by their own actions they practise the opposite of their Islamic calling.

The hypocrisy of the Muslim elders is further portrayed in the marriage envisaged between the ‘kaffir’, Balla, and his patient, Maman. Islam enjoins Maman to marry in consonance with the Qur’an. But the only qualified and therefore Malinke Muslim to marry her is the brother of the deceased husband, Issa. But Issa refuses to marry her in spite of his Malinke Islamic status. Issa plays down the Islamic calling but elevates his own selfishness and the mundane and physical demands to displace the Islamic calling because: “Issa didn’t want a wife who walked around on her arse with her leg stuck in the air” (22).

Kourouma paints a picture here: A Muslim rejects another Muslim on grounds of ill health making imprudent the elders’ wish to have a Muslim-Muslim marriage for Maman. Kourouma creates another tension in which the elders are compelled to do what is contrary to their culture and the Islamic religion. Balla, ‘the pagan’, is therefore given the chance to marry Maman. But he must recite ‘Allahu Akbar and bismillah over and over’ (22) as a requirement given by the imam for him to become qualified to be properly married to Maman. This adds to Kourouma’s way of exposing the weaknesses of the Islamic characters. For, qualification to become a Muslim husband just by repeating the Allahu Akbar, bismillah mantra is a ‘scathing mockery’ of the Islamic elderly. Kourouma mocks the repetition itself because Balla only reluctantly repeats the mantra but he becomes, in the eyes of the Malinke Muslim elderly, a Muslim. Yet he keeps to his faith and practice as a fetish priest and there is

not a single Islamic demand he observes after the repetition that seems to make him a Muslim husband. And that is why the same Malinke Muslim family that made him a Muslim thinks that their new Muslim convert, Balla, does not qualify to take care of Birahima. In fact, all that he wants is a new wife and not a new religion. In his stead it is El Hajj Yacouba that is chosen to cater for Birahima, though contrary to their expectation he sadly destroys Birahima's future.

Kourouma intensifies the derision when Balla refuses to repeat the Allahu Akbar, bismillah mantra. Though he says this only once, the elders eat their words and still go on to arrange the marriage, thereby contradicting the original Islamic order. In this case Kourouma investigates the role of Islam in the institution of marriage. What the elders have sanctioned is contrary to the proper way of Islamic marriage. Yet, the elders have circumvented this proper order and therefore have exposed their hypocritical behaviour. The conflict of principles has been exposed and instead of the elders standing their ground in the seemingly unbending stipulates of Islam they rather bend them to suit the problem at stake. I find that Kourouma exposes the elders' use of the contrary Marxist social demands to topple the rigid laws of Islam.

Kourouma also shows the extent of the elderly people's hypocrisy in their refusal to have Birahima come under the guardianship of Balla because:

Balla was teaching me hunting and animism and magic instead of teaching me the holy word of Allah from the Qur'an. My grandmother didn't approve of what Balla was teaching me. She wanted to send me away, far away from Balla, because she was afraid I would grow up to be a Bambara Kaffir *feticheur*, and not a proper Malinke who performed the five daily prayers (28).

However, it is this same Balla who –presumed to have become a Muslim as a result of saying the mantra only once –becomes Maman's healer and husband. They forget that the same Balla could have a bad influence on Maman, Birahima's Muslim

mother. Interestingly, also, he cannot be Birahima's guardian for fear that he turns him into a non-Muslim 'feticheur' something which his next 'mentor', guardian, Muslim kin, Yacouba, turns him into. It is a clear case of conflict of goals and the elders' confused state of mind concerning their relationship with non-believers. Kourouma's exposure of this situation is made more explicit when El Hajj Yacouba, to whom is entrusted the guardianship of Birahima, ends up being no better than Balla but rather unfortunately a worse sort. El Hajj Yacouba's behaviour, compared with Balla's, renders the former a hypocrite and a betrayer – a man who seems to keep his Islamic faith but denies the power thereof. Balla, the pagan, on the contrary, accepts himself as a fetish priest and is therefore not a hypocrite. El Hajj Yacouba's hypocrisy and deceit conflict with the Muslim elders' desire to raise Birahima in a proper Malinke Islamic way.

The contrary, in fact, the worse, is what Birahima undergoes as he is always sceptical of the power Yacouba claims to have as a Muslim 'grigriman' offering protection to people at the war front. His scepticism of the claimed power of El Hajj Yacouba throws his view of Islam into suspicion, reflecting the extent to which he is led astray by a Muslim elder who is expected to lead him into the 'straight path' of Islam. The several contradictions that happen here as Islam confronts the non-Islamic come as a result of Kourouma's craft in bringing the characters close to each other and comparing and contrasting them.

### **3.4 Islam and the Child Character**

Kourouma's use of the child is another important way of portraying the negative image of Islam in *Allah Is Not Obligated*. Closely connected to the discussion on the elderly Muslim men and women as they reflect the way Islam is presented, is the Muslim child. It is the purpose of this section to find out how the Muslim child, by

his faith and practices, extends Kourouma's presentation of Islam in *Allah Is Not Obligated*. The child at the centre of the discussion is the protagonist, Birahima, a victim of circumstances and a sufferer of the many wrong decisions taken for him by his Malinke Muslim elders. He is a young boy leaving Togoballa in search of his aunt so as to acquire a proper Islamic education, after the deaths of his parents, but the opposite is what eventually happens. Kourouma presents him in such a way that he confronts problems that negate the original goal set for him by his elders. Hardly is Birahima, under the guardianship of Yacouba, ever taught to say the Muslim prayers. Rather Yacouba infects him with his hypocritical, dishonest behaviour. This leaves Birahima in conflict with himself as he questions the reliability of Islam, and indeed other religions, based on Yacouba's wrongdoing, the wrongdoings of other religious people, warlords and other child soldiers.

Birahima's quest for meaning in the turn of the world in which he finds himself is intensified by the strange ways of his guardian, Yacouba. Kourouma's positioning of the child in the centre contributes to the way many West African writers make the child play central roles in their works. Writers like Camara Laye, Ama Ata Aidoo, Amma Darko, Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and others all make children play important roles in their works. Their purposes, though varying, have a common point at which society needs to take note of the need to place the child in a position to meet the challenges of life and not to be 'miseducated' to wreck the future of society which is in the children's hands.

On Africa's little ones that have turned child soldiers, Remy Ourdan (2001) referring to Kourouma says that the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has made the child a famous character in fiction. Ourdan notes that about 300,000 child soldiers were found around the world. At this time the civil war that had wrecked Somalia earlier brought about a

lot of these child soldiers. Ourdan notes that a lot of the former child soldiers implored Kourouma to write something that will condemn the practice. Kourouma, as has earlier been stated, responded positively in his *Allah Is Not Obligated*. Ourdan adds that Kourouma's story also becomes inspired by the political and civil unrest that hit West Africa in the 1990's with a gruesome Liberian civil war sparked off by the rebel warlord, Charles Taylor, leading to another in Sierra Leone. Ourdan writes that:

Kourouma sets his tale in the forest of Liberia and Sierra Leone, not far from where he grew up. He tells the story of Birahima, the child of the bush, then vagabond of the streets, and then a child soldier swept into the hellish wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. With coarse and cruel words that belie his age, the boy –who became a 'small soldier' because it was more alluring to live with a pointed Kalashnikov than with an outstretched hand –recounts scenes of spectacular suffering and human suffering (Ourdan, 2001:74).

That is part of Ourdan's comment on the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone and the role children played in them. This moved Kourouma to feature the child in the fiction he created. Ourdan notes that the choice of the child protagonist and other child characters in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* caused the French minister of culture and communication, Catherine Taska, to commend Kourouma "for giving these young victims a voice and acting as 'the keeper of their memory' "(Ourdan, 2001: 74).

Although Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* keeps the children's memory by using the child soldier as the central character, the problem is what kind of memory that is. Unlike the other Malinke Muslim, the young Laye in *The African Child* who at least has a well ordered family and education, the Malinke family in *Allah Is Not Obligated* is shocked by a bad memory of their young Birahima. And, Birahima and all the other child soldiers inherit a bad memory. The family's dream of making sure that Birahima is not 'miseducated' is unfortunately reversed by the very religion – Islam – as the rotten El Hajj Yacouba mentors him. Birahima becomes not only sceptical of Islam

but of all other religions in their bid to confront the challenges of life. His view, after going through numerous challenges with his tutor, Yacouba, at one point is this:

There we were again, lying flat on the ground. Two soldiers got shot in spite of all the bullshit Muslim grigris and shaman grigris (117).

Birahima's doubts about the potency of these religious forces as they contend with socio-political and economic forces is much more intensified when he finds that at the war front, Islam and the other religions, which the 'grigri' submerges, are all ineffective in solving the problems of mankind. Birahima's enigma is even more evident when the young Tête Brulée claims that he walked through gun bullets and conquered Niangbo:

It was at this time that I realized I didn't under understand this fucking universe, I didn't understand a thing about this bloody world, and I couldn't make head or tail of people and society. Tête Brulée with his grigris had just taken Niangbo! Was this grigri bullshit true or not? Who was there to tell me? Where could I go to find out? Nowhere. Maybe this grigri thing is true ... or maybe it is a lie, a scam, a con that runs the length and breadth of Africa (118).

The picture painted above of the mind of the young Birahima reflects a state of desperation and confusion. His inability to find answers from anyone, not even his closest guardian, Yacouba, is unfortunate and satirical. For Yacouba himself submerges whatever power there is in Islam which leaves Birahima confused. His confounded mind therefore has basis, for he argues that there is not any who could explain or solve or remove the mystery in which he finds himself. Kourouma's portrayal of the child in this manner intensifies the conflict in the mind of the Muslim child soldier, and the conflict between Islam and all the other religions. This is one of the ways in which, through child characters, Kourouma negatively represents Islam and indeed all the other religions which Islam either plays second fiddle to, or combines with to self-contradict.

### 3.5 Islam and Women Characters

Kourouma's portrayal of women in *Allah Is Not Obligated* is also important to the presentation of the image of Islam. This portrayal of women is a contribution to the view of women in the West African sub region by various fictional writers. Women's fight to have their freedom from male dominance is central to many West African literary works. For example, Ayi Kwei Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) features women at the core of the liberation movement to save the continent from the hands of 'The Ostentatious Cripples' 'The Predators'; and 'The Destroyers'. Several other West African fictional writers like Aminata Sow Fall, Mariama Bâ, Chinua Achebe, and Sembene Ousmane take up women's issues and portray women as capable of taking up leadership positions. They all make their contributions to the cause of women.

Women play a central role in *Allah Is Not Obligated*. The Malinke Islamic family from which Birahima comes features women who are ardent followers of Islam through whose behaviour Kourouma presents Islam slightly positively and largely negatively: The women take a central position in decision making, especially when it concerns the future of their Malinke Muslim child and central character, Birahima. However, in Kourouma's portrayal of Islam he carves women in such a way as to contradict themselves in their wish for a good future for Birahima. For example, Grandma's worry with the health of the ailing Maman throws up a great challenge in which they have to decide whether or not to accept the 'Kaffir', non-Muslim, magician, and fetish priest, Balla, to become Maman's healer. Helpless and torn between Maman's health and Islam on the one hand, and the magician's power on the other, they sacrifice their Islamic faith for the health of Maman.

The women, seeing that Issa, their own Muslim kin, would not change his mind to marry Maman, decide to bend the rules of Islam to have her marry the fetish priest. From the above we gather that one Islamic sanction has been sacrificed to meet another Islamic sanction. Kourouma's 'caustic savaging' of Islam in the affairs of the women in this case is deep.

Kourouma further intensifies the tension between Islam and the social forces in the hospital scene in which the 'toubab' nurse confesses that Maman's disease is:

not a toubab disease. It was black African native disease, a disease that the medicine and science of the white man could not cure. Only the grigris of an African healer can heal your wound'. The nurse was a Muslim and could not lie (17, 18).

Following from this, the troubled women characters betray Islam by having Maman released and given to the fetish priest, Balla. This way, Kourouma shows the extent to which the women's decision implies Islam's ineffectiveness in healing a faithful Muslim believer. Kourouma therefore creates questions and doubts on the reader's mind: That if Islam is capable of healing a faithful follower why is Maman not given to an imam or any other powerful member to heal her? Their resort to orthodox medicine and the failure thereof also compels them even further to contravene the rules of Islam especially when another Muslim female nurse who 'could not lie', says the only solution is in the hands of the African fetish priest. This is a scathing attack on and mockery of Islamic 'holy women'. It reveals Muslim characters' claim that their religion has a more powerful force as untrue. The irony in 'the nurse was a Muslim and could not lie' is clear. Birahima has been brought up to believe that Muslims cannot lie but he eventually learns from Maman's predicament that it is not true that Muslims cannot lie.

Another important woman character Kourouma uses to present the image of Islam as it confronts other forces is the woman, Moussoukoroni, the excissor, who actually rendered Maman lame. The narrator, Birahima, says that

Lots of Kaffirs who know nothing of Allah are completely evil but some Kaffirs are good. Moussoukoroni had a good heart and worked her magic and she was able to rescue Maman from the clutches of murderous evil spirits of the forest (15).

The role of this fetish priestess and magic-performing woman character in the presentation of women and Islam is noteworthy. Moussoukoroni who represents the non-Muslim Kaffir is considered 'good' even though she is not a Muslim. Further, she is able, in spite of her non-Muslim status, to arrest Maman's bleeding which they believe the forces of evil have imposed on her. This is another of Kourouma's mockery of Islamic characters in asking where the power of Islam is if this fetish woman is thus glorified. The community's view of Moussoukoroni is a positive one because after all she is the one – not any Muslim – able to 'save' Maman from excessive bleeding.

In a further presentation of the Muslim women's confused state of mind, and the hypocrisy that result, they attempt a rejection of Moussoukoroni's son in marriage to Maman. In Moussoukoroni's anger the ulcer she casts on Maman compels the Muslim women to go search for her to remove the spell. Here again, Kourouma questions the power of Islam in solving its own problems instead of capitulating to the fetish power which Islam itself considers as evil. Why and how the women meddle with something as un-Islamic as the fetish power is another of Kourouma's ways of 'caustically savaging' Islam and exposing its weaknesses.

Kourouma also looks at the Malinke Muslim women as their own enemies in the work as they follow Islam. The other women are quick to blame Maman for being

responsible for her own problems. They think that Maman is a witch who is only eating up her own leg. This blame game causes Birahima to want to leave home if his own mother is indeed a witch because the belief in the power of witchcraft is itself contrary to Islamic doctrine. Fearing Birahima's threat to leave home if his mother is indeed a witch, the women are quick to eat their own words by saying that:

Maman was not a witch; that she could not be a witch because she was a good Muslim (20).

Kourouma therefore exposes the lie these Islamic women characters tell, and their confused state of mind as they confront Maman's unfortunate predicament. This is immediately followed by more excuses by the Malinke Muslim women characters. This is an example Birahima gives:

My grandmother explained that Maman had been killed by Allah with just the ulcer and all the tears she has been crying. Because Allah in heaven can do whatever he likes, he doesn't have to be fair about what he does here on earth (21).

The language used by Grandma, although a seeming defence of Islam rather exposes it, for Allah is the one behind Islam. Therefore, if Allah has decided to do all the above, then it follows that Islam cannot be absolved except where it is seen as not backed by Allah. In this case Islam is to be seen as separate from Allah and Allah from Islam. Such a picture intensifies Kourouma's mockery of the Islamic holy woman and what she stands for, and adds to his negative representation of the religion.

Still on the role of women and how it affects the image of Islam, Kourouma's characterization of the hybrid Sister Hadja Gabrielle Aminata at the Sierra Leonean war front, is prominent. An initial description of how Kourouma introduces Sister

Hadja Gabrielle Aminata adds to his mockery of the Malinke Muslim women's contribution to portraying a bad Islamic image. The narrator notes that:

There were women and girls at Mile-Thirty Eight. The women did the cooking; the girls had their own unit. The unit was run by a vicious cow that was trigger-happy with a machine gun (A 'cow' is a fat woman with bad manners). Her name was Sister Hadja Gabrielle Aminata (180).

Kourouma captures the stereotypical women's role here in the cooking but at the same time gives S.H.G. Aminata a 'masculine' role in her trigger-happiness. His reference to S.H.G. Aminata as a cow reveals his contempt of her ways. In S.H.G. Aminata, Kourouma encapsulates all the religions that feature in the work and exposes them.

Additionally, Sister Hadja Gabrielle Aminata is described as:

one - third Muslim one-third Catholic and one third Animist. She was a colonel on account of she (sic) had lots of experience with young girls because over twenty years she'd excised nearly a thousand girls (excise is the part of the girls' initiation where they amputate the clitoris (180).

Kourouma's diction here is vituperative of the strange, hybrid and war-wrecked mind of S.H.G. Aminata. Her involvement with clitoridectomy suggests the women-as-their-own-enemy belief. Her trigger-happiness suggests violence; and her Islam, Christian and animist description suggests her strange religiosity, which further reveals the extent to which Islam (with all other religions) succumbs to society's problems. This is seen in the characters' ludicrous behaviour. Kourouma's presentation of S.H.G. Aminata, though vituperative, is indicative of women's bravery. She is presented as a brave warrior to the extent that before her death she is able to kill nine of the male hunters who are surprised that a woman can do that.

The image presented through S.H.G Aminata is Kourouma's further mockery not only of Islamic characters but all other religious characters, showing the 'left pole position' he places all of them. During investigations into the killing of Sita and the search for her killers S.H.G Aminata is again described:

The women all arrived with AK-47s, and the colonel herself came in Hajj dress, meaning dressed like a Muslim woman on her way back from Mecca. She carried her Kalash under the frills of her skirts. That's tribal wars that does (sic) that. (182).

Here S.H.G Aminata is presented as representing both war and peace at the same time, war in the symbol of the AK-47 and peace in her Muslim costume, thereby making fun of herself. And to say that it is a tribal war that does that is to imply that the position S.H.G. Aminata takes will not happen in a peaceful setting. Moreover, given the circumstances of the war setting the women are only 'free' to practise all manner of evil to survive.

Kourouma's style in carving S.H.G Aminata in the symbol of the AK-47, and Hajj dress, above signifies conflict of purpose. In this character Kourouma skilfully, yet mockingly, yokes violence and peace. He goes on to be even more scornful in making the narrator think that the excuse of tribal wars is responsible for this. There is some truth, though, in the escape to the tribal war blame factor because but for the war setting, the women would not have been as malevolent as Kourouma presents them. Therefore, to survive they take up hypocritical and hybrid postures. It can be observed that Kourouma's representation of Islam through the women characters is a negative one.

### 3.6 The Portrayal of Allah in the World of *Allah Is Not Obligated*

Islam has its origin and essence in the belief in the existence of Allah. Allah is seen as all powerful, just and perfect. This belief in Allah is not dissimilar to the Judeo-Christian belief in the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God. Other attributes of Allah are his compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. All of these attributes paint a positive image of Allah so that wherever the Islamic person finds himself he is sure that these positive attributes of Allah will show so that his followers will feel safe and secure in his presence. The quest for security from Allah is crucial to Islamic faithfuls because of the vagaries of life. Allah is therefore trusted to be ever ready to come to the aid of those who put their trust in him. Such a presence which Allah possesses has been captured for example by Chaikh Hamidou Kane in *Ambiguous Adventure* in which Allah is worthy of worship. The Islamic religion is positively presented by making the Muslim characters conform to the principles of Islam. The young protagonist, Samba Diallo, is brought up to conform to Islamic standards.

Contrarily, Kourouma does the opposite in *Allah Is Not Obligated*. The title itself is actually to be read as ‘Allah Is not obliged to be fair about all the things he does here on earth.’ By this is implied a clear case of contradiction. Allah, who in the foregoing paragraph has been pictured as perfect and infallible, at least as far as the general concept of him is concerned, is now in the world of Kourouma’s text being associated with unfairness. The question Kourouma therefore leaves on the minds of readers is what Allah really is – fair or unfair. And Kourouma deepens this question especially when he sets his novel in a turbulent war situation to see how Allah in the painful world of the text, would respond to it. This is the case especially because evil is rife in Kourouma’s war settings.

However, even before driving the scene to turbulent evil packed Liberia and Sierra Leone, a Togoballa example in the death of Maman's husband, who is also Birahima's father, reveals some interesting things that Kourouma attacks on the role of Allah in the text. Grandma argues that Birahima's late father was full of good deeds and yet Allah snatched him away in death,

because no one can know the will of Allah and because the almighty in heaven doesn't give a shit and does whatever he wants, and doesn't have to be fair about everything he decides to do here on earth ( 24 ) .

It sounds like Birahima and Grandma are sceptical of the importance of good deeds; if the upright do not live to continue with their good deeds, then good deeds are played down. The narrator questions the goodness and perfection of Allah if he doesn't allow the 'good' people to live on as an example for reformation to the 'bad', 'evil' ones.

Furthermore, Maman's woes and her death reveal more of the role of Allah in the text. Birahima is made to believe that:

Maman died because Allah wanted her back. The Imam said that a devout Muslim is not allowed to criticize Allah, or say anything bad about him. Then he said "my mother didn't die of magic, she died of her ulcer .... And because the time Allah had accorded her on earth was up (24).

This is Kourouma's way of showing the unquestioned authority of Allah thereby exposing Allah's hold on to ultimate power and barring his faithfuls from any contribution to whatever he does. The notion that no one is allowed to criticize Allah also exposes Kourouma's way of revealing the Malinke Muslim community's unquestioned acceptance of everything Islamic since it is assumed that everything is Allah's doing and no one dares question why he does what he does. The Muslim characters' claim that Maman's death is due to natural cause, even though it attempts

to play down the potency of magic, is a sign of the Malinke Muslim family's confounded view of the situation.

Closely related to the foregoing is the philosophical problem of suffering and evil which the theory of theodicy also raises, and which Kourouma brings out in the way Allah is presented in the work. After Maman's death,

everyone cried and cried on account of how Maman had suffered so much down here on earth. They all said Maman would go straight up to heaven to be with Allah because of the hardships and sufferings she's had down here on earth and because Allah didn't have any more hardships and sufferings left to give her (25).

The 'because' clauses used in the above suggest the condition for gaining access to heaven – suffering. Kourouma shows here that it is inconsistent to associate suffering with the goodness, perfection and mercy of Allah because we all know that suffering is distasteful and is a cause of most of man's penchant for wrongdoing. Therefore, Kourouma's presentation of Allah here as a dispenser of suffering to his faithfuls and using it as a condition for access to heaven, generates questions. Common knowledge has it that often when man is exposed to suffering the natural reaction is to undo it. In the bid to halt the suffering, all the religious characters resort to evil ways that contradict the ethical demands of their faiths. It suggests that if Allah is the dispenser of suffering which as evidenced in Kourouma's, is a condition for accessing heaven, then he can blame no one for the evil they do because Kourouma suggests that Allah himself is the cause of it. This issue on theodicy which Kourouma presents is another of his part of the 'caustic savaging' of Islam in the text.

Also, the characters are portrayed in their daily lives in the novel to be seeking to avoid pain and suffering in order to be happy. Yacouba's intention for going to

Liberia is to seek money that he thinks will give him happiness, but strangely in this war zone, pain and suffering are rife. How can one seek happiness in a zone where there is only pain and suffering? Also, given the argument Kourouma's narrator raises, that Maman goes to heaven because she suffered, one will question whether anyone of Kourouma's characters is out there to seek suffering as a precondition for accessing heaven. For, it is evident from *Allah Is Not Obligated* that Yacouba's argument is that he is going to the stormy war front with the ultimate goal of taking advantage of people's suffering by promising to give them relief from same. His bid to amass wealth and to give himself pleasure – the ultimate – is epicurean and pleasure-seeking. This is another of Kourouma's dextrous style of presenting suffering as a precondition to accessing heavenly bliss.

On the issue of the infinite goodness of God, David Hume (1935), a British empiricist philosopher argues that from a finite effect it is impossible to infer the infinite. He notes that in the world we have evidence of goodness, wisdom and love and so whoever created the world has more of the goodness, wisdom and love but it is difficult for man with his finite mind to contend that God/Allah is infinitely good and so on. Hume adds that for the reason that the world is composed not only of goodness and love but also of waste, destruction and evil God/Allah, it follows, would infinitely be associated with these. These suggest that both negative and positive attributes will be associated with Allah. From this humanistic philosophy it can be inferred that Kourouma taps into this argument by questioning the exact role Allah plays in the world of the novel – positive or negative, or both. We find though that Kourouma paints a rather negative picture of Allah especially in associating him with unfairness, and unquestioned authority.

Another point to note in talking about the goodness and perfection of Allah in the world of the novel is that he cares little about the characters in this war setting. The central character, Birahima, is abandoned to wanton destruction and evil in the hands of Yacouba and warlords. At the end of the road the child does not meet his auntie, Mahan, into whose hands his parents and guardians back in Togoballa wish to have him to achieve their dream of seeing him become a 'good' Malinke Muslim. He would never become one, seeing the evil he has experienced even in the hands of his own Malinke Muslim guardian, Yacouba.

Still on the role of Allah in the text: After Yacouba gets himself involved in the drivers' affair and is hurt, Birahima, the narrator, notes that:

Allah made him better because Yacouba performs the five daily prayers everyday and was slitting the throats of sacrifices. Allah made him better because his sacrifices were fitting (35).

To argue that Allah saved him because of the above Islamic ritualistic stipulates is to suggest that Allah glosses over the evil that one does if only, or better put, merely because one observes the creeds. Kourouma again invites a look at what matters to Allah and Islam: the creed and dogma on the one hand or the ethics and morals on the other. The statement is a satire of the way things should rather be. Therefore the privileging of dogma and the softening of moral values is frowned upon and ridiculed in the very irony of the statement; Muslim characters are expected to be more ethical than ritualistic, a kind of 'obedience is better than sacrifice'.

Related to the above is the problem the characters have with evil, suffering and death and how to deal with them. Kourouma therefore draws Allah and Islam into this. And Muslims, incapable of finding answers to this, have recourse to blame Allah, the source of the Islamic religion, for being responsible for such things, and not Islam. This situation puts the author of the faith, Allah, and Islam apart. This recourse raises

mind-boggling questions to the literary critic. It is an attempt to associate evil with Allah while absolving Islam of any. At the same time, seeing that their argument runs into trouble they argue that Allah is not to be held responsible for the unfairness, pain and suffering on earth, and also that he does whatever he pleases.

An argument like this invites another argument on theodicy which Kourouma seems to raise – That if there is a good and perfect God, why does he allow evil to exist and why does he allow people to suffer? Various philosophical thoughts about the nature of God have grappled with this problem even till today and the argument is still on-going. Kourouma also presents evil as a fact of life, a thing that affects everyone irrespective of race, sex, colour, culture or religion including Islam which also struggles to find meaning and answer to in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*. And since the concept of, and response to evil differ as far as different societies are concerned, Kourouma tests this in the Malinke Islamic society to see how it responds to it. Bewildered by this problem the Malinke Muslim society's last answer is to associate unfairness with Allah with the excuse that Allah is not obliged to be fair. An argument like this leads down a slippery slope: If Allah who is thought to be omnipotent and morally good is not obliged to be fair in this situation, who else is or should? And why should Allah blame anyone for any evil since he himself is not obliged to be fair?

Moreover, discussions of a Western conception of the problem of evil place God/Allah at the centre of the universe; that God/Allah controls or at least could control everything in the world. This means that there is nothing he does not know and that there is also nothing he either does not cause or permit. Western conception uses the verb 'permit' here because it implies that God/Allah could stop evil from

happening so that something else which is better, in this case ‘good’, would exist instead of evil especially when omnipotence and monopoly of power are part of his attributes. Kourouma brings Islam and Allah into this by exposing the characters to all kinds of evil, and from the way the characters capitulate to it all the time, he suggests that the religious characters themselves are also not to be blamed. If ‘Allah [himself] is not obliged to be fair about all the things he does here on earth’ then it follows that his followers are not to be blamed either for capitulating to evil especially when they have free will to choose between good and evil –two phenomena they came into the world to meet. But, especially in the war zone where evil is rife, it is not a surprise that even religious characters’ ways are seriously affected by it.

Another Western conception and philosophy about the problem of evil result from the alleged contradiction between God’s omnipotence and moral goodness on the one hand, and the existence of evil on the other. This is a problem that confronts many a religious people as they struggle to find answers to. There have been several research responses to this problem of evil and of suffering, one of which is found in Richard Wolheim (1969) on *Hume on Religion*. In this work he argues his position on why God/Allah allows people to suffer in the theory of Manichaeism. Manichaeism holds the view that there are two forces in this world –the forces of Good and Evil. The theory has it that Good and Evil continue to engage in the struggle for supremacy but that neither has been able to conquer the other yet. Once this tussle continues, the Manicheans think there is no problem or need to worry. But this would meet with problems as the war setting in Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obligated* is full of tension. The plethora of evil causes all the Muslim characters to fail in their faith thereby making the positive image that Islam appears to represent become questionable and this cannot be ignored but examined. This is because Kourouma’s El Hajj Yacouba’s

decision that he will profit by going into a war front where evil and suffering are rife throws up criticism.

Islamic characters battle with evil everywhere in *Allah Is Not Obligated*. In attempting to solve the problem of evil, yet another Western philosophical thought, illusionism, has it that humans should look on evil as an illusion. That evil is not real and that if humans understand the ways of God they will find that there is no evil at all and that what happens as evil is simply an illusion. Yet this Western thought immediately runs into problems since evil and suffering are so palpable in Kourouma's war setting for it to be just considered as illusory.

The African philosophical response to the problem of evil is not traced to contradiction between God's attributes on the one hand and the problem of evil on the other. For Africans the problem of evil is associated with the activities of the divinities and the use of human freedom. Yet it would still be argued that God is aware of the activities of the gods, but does nothing about it.

Islam's response to the problem of evil is similar to that of the Judeo-Christian belief that the devil caused man to sin against God through disobedience, therefore compelling God to drive man out of the garden, to suffer. In all of this we find that the role Allah plays in the world of the text is not a good one and that he is incapable of or unwilling to halt the turbulence that has gripped the Liberia-Sierra Leonean setting Kourouma creates, and in which he places the Islamic characters.

### 3.7 How Islam Relates with other Religions in *Allah Is Not Obligated*

The representation of Islam in *Allah Is Not Obligated* is also made all the more interesting as Islam relates with other religions – Christianity and Animism. Kourouma compares, contrasts, and connects Islam with other beliefs to expose various conflicts and contradictions. In doing this, he uses Yacouba as a key character. Yacouba's preoccupation is not the El-Hajj status he got from Mecca but the juju power he has from Africa, a power which by the manner of presentation, is Kourouma's way of showing that if there is any power in Islam that power is subordinate to the juju power. For Yacouba, the power that actually protects is juju and not Islam. This character therefore represents Islam's inability solve problems. However, Kourouma does not give any praise to juju per se, for in Birahima's mentality the scepticism about the power of juju is clear. This suggests that Kourouma does not spare juju power either and that it is also incapable of providing solution man's material needs. The manner in which Kourouma brings these religions together in comparison reveals that neither Islam nor juju can solve any of man's problems. Again, it shows how Kourouma negatively represents Islam because Islam generally condemns or should condemn such things as juju. Therefore, Yacouba's elevation of juju power shows how Islam denies its own power, if it has any, given the evidence in the novel, to favour juju power if it also has any.

Kourouma's way of bringing the two religions– Islam and Christianity –together is to make mockery of the characters that represent them and to show that they also have not offered any solutions to mankind's social problems. These are two religions' whose roots come from Judaism and yet they have engaged in head-on confrontations in [religious] history and no one knows when this tension will end. In *Allah Is Not Obligated* however, the religions blend to face the brutalities of the war. For example

when Yacouba meets the funny ‘Christian’ warlord Prince Johnson, the latter shows his twin identity –‘Muslim grigriman’. This fetches him the chance to become a member of Johnson’s spiritual protection board. Kourouma’s mockery craft here is evident in how these three religions attempt to cohere and at the same time attempt to offer solutions to the problems prevalent in the wretched war zone. He intensifies this mockery using the central character, Birahima, who finds it difficult to believe in all of them especially Islam which his guardian, Yacouba, is expected to ensure he keeps. Kourouma therefore presents the behaviour of the Islamic character in this way to show how something Islam would consider as ‘haram’ is now accepted as good, thereby contradicting itself.

Moreover, as Kourouma places Islam and the other religions in a war setting, he presents a very good testing ground for all of them to prove their substance. This is especially the case as a peaceful setting might not be better able to reveal the crudities of mind, the hypocrisy and the unfaithfulness that lie hidden in the hearts of so called religious faithfuls. We have learnt that from the very beginning of the narrative, Yacouba’s intention is to go to the war front to make money which is a clear evidence of the Muslim man’s love for violence as a means to amass filthy lucre to self. If Islamic men are represented this way then it is a clear case of mockery and a way of exposing the rotten hearts and minds of many so called good Muslim characters who are supposed to do the will of Allah in being peace lovers.

Another way Kourouma represents Islam negatively is in the character Sister Hadja Gabrielle Aminata who deftly combines all the three religions – Islam, Christianity (Catholicism) and Animism. The ecumenical and syncretic posture of this female character is yet another of Kourouma’s way of showing the extent to which separatist and exclusivist claims by various religions is countered in an atmosphere of war. Her

ability to combine the three religions so well shows how the seemingly impossible things in peaceful society become possible in war settings. And the contradictions are so evident in the dos and don'ts of these religions which she cleverly yokes. The way in which Muslim characters tolerate symbols of the cross and other Catholic symbols is interesting and yet Kourouma makes it possible in Sister Hadja Gabrielle Aminata. Kourouma's mockery is biting in the way he carves this woman since by her very name she represents confusion.

Yet, S.H.G. Aminata shows that whatever satisfies one's social, material and survival needs is what matters. Therefore, she thinks that contradicting herself is not a problem. For her, once the social and material demands are met, the spiritual can or should be used in whatever way to meet the demands of the physical, socio-economic and political. This is another way Kourouma subordinates the spiritual to the material.

### **3.8 Islam and Politics: the Marxist Underpinnings**

This section looks at the way Kourouma uses the political atmosphere to portray a negative image of Islam. A view of politics as Terry Eagleton (1986) gives is a key consideration in this discussion: Eagleton notes that '[he] means by the political no more than the way we organize our social life together, and the power relations which this involves' (134). The 'power relations' of the political setting in *Allah Is Not obliged* is not a peaceful one. All the characters struggle in the turbulence to protect their interest: Politically powerful characters hold on to power while other political power seekers attempt to snatch power from the hands of the holders. The tension between them further intensifies leading to violence and very many other forms of evil. And as the political leaders and those yearning to overthrow them battle for political power, the grassroots, the ordinary people, who usually, are the ones that put

the leaders up there, are the suffering lot. Kourouma's Liberian and Sierra Leonean war settings perfectly represent this atmosphere of tension leading to suffering and evil among not only the politicians and warlords but the entire populace. In Kourouma's *Allah Is Not obliged* Islam is tested by the political atmosphere while the political is tested by Islam. The result of this two way test under discussion presents contradictions on both sides.

The discussion seeks to find out how Kourouma presents Islam amidst the political difficulties in the two countries. His Muslim characters are carved in ways that test Islam's response to war. For example, Yacouba, the EL-Hajj, goes to Liberia on a dual mission: to hand over Birahima, the young Muslim, [now child soldier], into the hands of his aunt Mahan; the other is to take advantage of the political turmoil to achieve his material needs. For Yacouba the ultimate is the satisfaction of his material needs so that Birahima's future is only a cover up or rather unnecessary, or subordinate to the ultimate satisfaction of that need. That is probably why Yacouba does not mind when the young Birahima is enlisted in the rebel forces within the political fracas. Once Birahima bears a gun, it is for Yacouba (himself carrying guns under the frills of his boubou) a chance to achieve his greedy materialist advantage at the expense of his religion, and Birahima's innocence and future. Kourouma therefore presents the EL-Hajj Yacouba as hypocritical, opportunistic, avaricious and immoral. Thus, Yacouba contradicts Islamic teachings of ethics and morals in this troubled political environment.

Also, the involvement of political characters like Colonel Muamar Al-Quathafi, Houphouet Boigny, Blaise Campaore, Samuel Kanyon Doe, Charles Taylor, Foday Sankoh and others further shows the intensity of the Liberia-Sierra Leone political problem. Colonel Muamar Al-Quathafi, the then Muslim leader of the Islamic state

of Libya is brought into Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* not by accident but as a representation of the truth. We can find the truth in the story of the Muslim leader, Quathafi who actually supported the rebel warlord Charles Taylor. Taylor had stolen large sums of money from the Doe administration of which he was part and was staging an overthrow of Doe's regime through a civil war which was mainly between the Krahn (Doe's ethnic group) and the Grebos. The Muslim, Quathafi, seeing that he has problems with Samuel Doe's administration, takes advantage by teaching Taylor and his rebels guerrilla warfare. The narrator says that:

And that's not all. Quathafi palmed him off to Blaise Compaore, the dictator of Burkina Faso, with lots of commendations like, he was commendable. Compaore, the dictator of Burkina Faso, recommended him to Houphouet Boigny, dictator of Cote d'Ivoire, like he was a choirboy or saint. Houphouet, who hated Samuel Doe for murdering his son-in-law, was happy to meet Taylor and kissed him right on the mouth (60) .

Houphouet Boigny finally agrees to sponsor the transportation of arms and ammunition to Liberia to help Taylor kill and unseat his stark enemy, Doe. The scene, here shown, is all sparked by the Muslim, Quathafi, at whose command to the other political leaders, the troubles in Liberia, and later in Sierra Leone all sprung. Kourouma further mocks the Muslim leader in this:

Compared to Taylor, Compaore; ... Houphouet Boigny ... and Quathafi... are civilized people, he makes them look like civilized people. Why would they support a barefaced liar, an out-and-out thief, a crook like Taylor and make him head of state? Why? Why? It can only be one of two reasons: either they are as corrupt as Taylor, or they are playing what people in Africa with its barbaric dictatorships and liberticidal fathers of nations call 'la grande' politique (61).

The involvement of the Muslim Quathafi in the political tension in Liberia is significant in that he is indeed the one who supports Taylor's evil and infects his other colleagues in the political unrest. And Kourouma, a critic of Boigny, who actually made Kourouma run into exile, helps to expose the political turmoil. Kourouma's mockery of the Muslim Quathafi and his cohorts reveals Muslim characters' conflict

of ideals. Kourouma seeks to show that the political tension in Liberia is due to the involvement, indeed contribution of the Islamic leader Quathafi who supports Taylor's lies and thievery. The mockery is even more seen in the comparison he makes between Taylor and all the other political leaders who goad him into the evil of war. Actually what Kourouma portrays is that they are less civilized than Taylor himself since the real evil of war could have been halted by the Muslim leader Quathafi and his evil friends. It is therefore Kourouma's sarcastic lash at the Muslim leader. And this is another of Kourouma's 'caustic savaging of Islam', and a representation of the idea that Islam, instead of representing peace, contradicts itself in the war Quathafi propels. The constellation of fragmented warlords in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* from both the Liberian and Sierra Leonean settings shows the level of confusion and tension in the work.

Another key character, Prince Johnson (also based on a real person) breaks away from the Taylor front and founds his own rebel group. Prince Johnson takes advantage of the religion and superstition which play a central role in Kourouma's work. Prince Johnson claims a Christian faith and affiliation. Yet, this warlord and politician on meeting Yacouba, an El Hajj, is glad to have been 'blessed' with having a Muslim 'grigiman'. This is contrary to his (Yacouba's) claimed Muslim faith as Islam also conflicts with Johnson's Christian faith. Kourouma's art in making these two characters meet each other and attempt to make the two religions cohere is probably indicative of the exposure of conflicts and a further questioning of the possibilities for these two religions to gel. Kourouma's Prince Johnson takes advantage of anything – Christian, Muslim, magic, whatever to achieve his political desires while Yacouba also takes advantage of Johnson's military and financial might to satisfy his material interest. Further, the warlord Johnson is also confused about and takes advantage of

another contrary force –Animism. His Christian faith abhors Animism. Yet Yacouba's advertisement of himself as a Muslim 'grigiman', instead of scaring Johnson to condemn him, rather impels and encourages him to accept the Muslim and Animist Yacouba, thereby contradicting himself.

Yet another real Malinke Muslim warlord character, El Hajj Koroma, formerly of the Doe front, is also Kourouma's other way of presenting a bad image of Islam. El Hajj Koroma's Malinke Muslim identity is smeared with breaches of Islam's peace and submission to the will of Allah claim: Kourouma introduces El Hajj Koroma with a description of the tribal and political situation amidst the war. Kourouma presents him as a defender of the Malinke Muslim people who are under attack by the Krahn. A description of the Koroma camp gives a tainted image of his Islamic religion in the political and tribal unrest:

Worosso was where El Hajj Koroma's camp was. The compound there had human heads on stakes all around the boundary like all the tribal camps in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Walahe! That's tribal wars. We walked through something that looked like a gate, marked out with two skulls on stakes with two armed child soldiers between them (206).

El Hajj Koroma, a former minister in the Doe administration, now defending his Malinke Muslim people, turns into something like a monster. He is presented as having misrepresented the peace ideals of Islam and rather gets so heinously wicked in using human skulls on stakes at his Worosso camps around the country. Kourouma's description of El Hajj Koroma by comparing him with the other warlords reveals more of the brutalities of the Muslim characters especially, in this case where El Hajj Koroma is both a warlord politician and a Muslim.

Again, the crudity Kourouma portrays about the Islamic religion is seen in the presentation of two child soldiers fully armed and positioned between the human

skulls stakes. It reveals Kourouma's exposure of Islamic men's insensitivity to the plight of children. Kourouma therefore criticizes them for contributing to social evils and worsening the future of children in the manner in which they are treated in his fictional world. So that if Islamic men do not find a way to salvage the future of the children then the message that Kourouma gives is that of hopelessness and shame. This image of Islam presented through the Malinke Muslim warlord and politician, El Hajj Koroma, is disgusting and questions its role in ensuring a better life for Africa's little ones. Clearly, Kourouma rejects an Islamic solution to human problems. In the world of *Allah Is Not Obligated* the religion only professes to be what it is not –peace. This is another of Kourouma's way of portraying a defence for one's tribal affiliation and not necessarily one's religious (Islamic), but socio-cultural connection. For, here, it is the Malinke people's lives that matter and not Islamic people's. And since the atmosphere of the turbulence is essentially tribal and political the Islamic tinges can only stay on the fringes. And, it can only come to force when it serves the ultimate purpose of the economic and political demands. This is why Islam plays a subordinate role to the social demands in the lives of the politicians.

Moreover, Islam receives another disgusting image through the real warlord politician El-Hajj Koroma, who is only interested in exploiting the refugees in his camp. El Hajj Koroma, in spite of his Islamic religious faith which encourages kindness, in for example the giving of alms, rather disobeys this order. He receives aid in the form of food and medicines from NGO's but the El-Hajj refuses to give the needed assistance to the intended for – the refugees –and uses it to feed his own rebels. However, even in this case they only have very little quantities of it. Kourouma paints a bad picture of Islam in El-Hajj Koroma on this here:

But you didn't get to eat well in El-Hajj Koroma's army. All you got was a little handful of rice in a corner of the plate that wasn't enough for a sick grandmother on her last legs with nothing to do except lie in her hut and die all the time. There wasn't enough rice. Absolutely not nearly enough. El-Hajji Koroma's system was based on exploiting refugees, ripping off NGO's. (209).

This heartless treatment meted out to the weak and helpless by the Muslim warlord politician, El-Hajj Koroma, portrays another rather sickening image of Islamic holy men. It is a sadistic behaviour which Kourouma exposes. This is another of the evidence Kourouma provides of Islamic holy men's hypocrisy which contradicts a key essence in Islam –the show of love in alms giving (the zakat) to the poor and needy.

Also, El Hajj Koroma trains his victims to tell lies to the NGO's for food aid which he converts into his own corrupt use. This is one of the speeches a member of his poor but well-trained lie-telling refugees give to outwit the NGO's:

Why will you not trust our brothers, the men of El Hajj Koroma who have saved our lives? Everything you give them, they give us. They are our brothers. When they receive something, it is as though it were placed in our own hands. We cannot come out to accept your donations and you cannot come into the camp. We, the refugees of Woroso camp, refuse all donations which do not come through our brothers (209).

That is the El Hajj warlord corrupting the minds of the young ones without thinking of the effect on their future and the impact on his religion.

The war environment in which Kourouma places El-Hajj Koroma and others exacerbates another weakness in Islam since Islamic characters cannot cope with the harsh socio-economic and political situation. They therefore resort to the worst kinds of evil, thereby contradicting their religious calling. On the Sierra Leonean political and war front there is a lot to expose about the image of Islam in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*. The hypocrisy of the characters in the Liberian political scene, is similar

to the Sierra Leonean one. And like the Liberian scene, Kourouma involves Allah in the turbulence:

In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful, let's start at the start (157).

Sierra Leone is a fucked-up mess, a big-time fucked-up mess. A country is a fucked-up mess when you get warlords dividing it up between them like in Liberia, but when you've got political parties and warlords it's a big-time fucked-up mess (ibid).

Kourouma further questions the role Allah plays in this 'fucked-up' situation. He questions the omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience and mercy of Allah as the situation does not show the exhibition of these attributes. The conflict created is found in the political turbulence against the goodness, power and mercy of Allah. Here again in this political mêlée in Sierra Leone Kourouma brings up again the theodicy argument. The issue about the goodness and perfection of Allah is again questioned by his very presence in the troubled affairs of the Sierra Leonean political and war space and yet evil is what holds sway. This suggests that evil has triumphed over good. Kourouma further reveals the presence of more evil in his use of the Sierra Leonean warlord, political leader, Foday Sankoh, who is supported by the Liberian warlord, Charles Taylor. In Sankoh's bid to disenfranchise the citizenry he resorts to amputations; Sankoh takes a sadistic political posture in his own words thus:

No hands, no election. It was obvious: someone with no arms couldn't vote. All Foday Sankoh had to do was cut off the arms of as many people as possible..... The 'long sleeve; short sleeve' policy was put into action. 'Short sleeve' was when you cut off the whole forearm: 'long sleeve' was when you cut off both hands at the wrist... Amputations were rife, and they were carried out with no quarter of mercy. If a woman showed up with a baby on her back, the woman's hands were amputated and the baby's hands too. It didn't matter how old the baby was on account of how you might as well amputate baby citizens because they'll be voters someday (165).

A gory political situation like this is Kourouma's way of portraying how humans can be insensitive to the plight of others, especially in a war setting. So, if all the religions including Islam cannot find a solution to this problem, then Kourouma suggests that it

is an unfortunate situation that gives no hope. This is an unpalatable situation that religious society including Islam has to confront. In the midst of this situation is the central Muslim character, Birahima, whose dream of becoming a responsible person like Camara Laye's Laye in the future, is defeated. Unlike Laye whose family has succeeded in giving him formal education along with Islamic training, Birahima, himself carrying a Kalashnikov, gets enmeshed in this ugly political mess. The mess shown has a futuristic and cyclical nature since, from the above, it starts with adult wickedness. It carries further on to the helpless children who will in the future have become adults themselves and with the rotten ideology planted in them, will transfer it to generations on end.

Moreover, Kourouma presents General Tieffi, on the Sierra Leonean warfront as a 'spitting image of Foday Sankoh' (172). It is General Tieffi who shocks Birahima with:

in tribal wars, a little human meat is necessary. It makes the heart hard, very hard, and protects against bullets. The best protection against whistling bullets is probably a piece of human meat. For example, I Tieffi, never go to the war front, never go to battle without a calabash... of human blood. A calabash of human blood makes you strong, makes you fierce, makes you cruel, and protects you from whistling bullets (174).

This position is similar to El Hajj Yacouba's original intention for going to the Liberian and Sierra Leonean battle fronts. Such a macabre picture of Tieffi, the evil politician, further shows the extent of the depravity of the human condition which Islam has so far proven incapable of solving. The unfeeling disposition towards one another is a human weakness that Kourouma exposes. And the possible influence on the protagonist, Birahima, shows Kourouma's trepidation and scepticism about any possible good future for the Malinke Muslim youth, Birahima, and all the other young people in Kourouma's fictional world in *Allah Is Not Obligated*.

Additionally, there seems to be a play on words by Kourouma in the use of the name, 'Tieffi'. Tieffi is close to the Malinke and Bambara word 'tieffin' used for a man with very black skin. Tieffi is also the Akan word for faeces. The use of 'Tieffi' may be intended because Kourouma uses another Akan word, 'obayifo' (p. 15), meaning a witch or a sorcerer, to tell the way the Malinke Muslim society considers the fetish priest, Balla. And, given the rotten thought Tieffi holds and his unfeeling behaviour towards other people, Kourouma perhaps associates him with very black (dirty and evil) thoughts, and faeces as symbols of rejection, scorn, uselessness, depravity, and in fact downright satanic. This use of the stench symbol can also be found in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* in which Armah uses the symbols of sputum and faeces to represent the corruption of the time in the Ghanaian setting of his work. General Tieffi therefore represents filthiness in its intense form, for Kourouma has carved him as a general of filth in the very name that he (Tieffi) bears.

Indeed in reality, Kourouma portrays that the African continent's religious and secular institutions, offer no hope. Asaah (2009) notes of Kourouma that 'he does not offer unambiguous messianic messages of hope' although Mbiti observes that the continent and its people are said to be 'notoriously religious' and often look up to religion for help.

In this section I have attempted to show how Kourouma represents Islam in *Allah Is Not Obligated*. My arguments have tried to show that the Islamic religion represented in Kourouma's novel is 'caustically savaged', materialistic, unspiritual, and ineffective in solving difficult secular problems. I find that Kourouma's Muslim characters' misconduct causes Islam itself to contribute to the problems. All of these findings

support Cham's left wing categorisation which shows that some writers present Islam in a negative fashion and as an impediment to social fulfilment contrary to the right wing view which sees Islam in a positive light. Therefore, my arguments support the claim that Muslim characters are more materialistic than spiritual, committing them to becoming maladjusts and contradicting their spiritual calling. It also shows that the role Allah plays in the world of the text is negative, revealing several contradictions as the Islamic religion confronts Marxist realities of secular social life.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ISLAM IN *THE PROPHET OF ZONGO STREET*

#### 4.0 Introduction

The Ghanaian writer, Mohammed Naseehu Ali enters the literary scene with his collection of ten short stories titled *The Prophet Of Zongo Street*. The stories come in this order: 'The Story of Day and Night', 'The Prophet of Zongo Street', 'Live-In', 'The Manhood Test', 'The True Aryan', 'Ward G-4', 'Rachmaninov', 'Mallam Sile', 'Faith', and 'Man Pass Man'. However, based on the focus of my thesis I have selected for analysis five of these stories that represent Islam. These are 'The Prophet Of Zongo Street', Live-in, 'The Manhood Test', 'Mallam Sile' and 'Faith'.

This chapter puts forward the thesis that Ali represents Islam more negatively than positively. In terms of Cham's categorization, Ali 'vacillates between reverence and castigation of Islamic holy men.' Where there are elements of the positive sometimes there is still some critical irony in them that shows the representation in a less positive light. Sometimes as William Blake thought about Milton's 'Paradise Lost', Ali becomes 'the devil's advocate' especially where he makes Kumi, the philosopher and African Traditional Religion preacher, sound full of sense in his proselytizing message about the truth of the African Traditional Religion. This is because Kumi's message suggests that African Traditional Religion is true while the foreign religions including Islam and Christianity are false. But these foreign religions have condemned the African Traditional Religion. Yet, Ali's 'killing' of Kumi makes nonsense of his religion and philosophy since it appears that through his death the foreign religions triumph. Yet the young narrator seems a potential apostle of Kumi's African Traditional Religion. These are the reasons why I posit that Ali 'vacillates'

between the negative and positive representation of the Islamic religion although there is evidence in the work to show that the negative representation far outweighs the positive. That which renders his attitude to Islam tolerant is the measure of praise he gives a few of his Muslim characters. Moreover, compared with Armah who has nothing good to say about Islam I find it safe to hold the view that Ali's attitude to the Islamic religion is lenient.

This chapter discusses the way Mohammed Naseehu Ali portrays Islam in *The Prophet of Zongo Street*. It shows how he uses characters, settings, irony, satire, and situation to expose the strengths and weaknesses of the Islamic religion. It also exposes the various conflicts that occur as Islam confronts other religions, and non-religious difficulties. Islamic dogma on the one hand and the characters' morals on the other are also brought up. I look at the role of characters that are Islamist extremists, moderates, atheists, infidels, sceptics and renegades in the stories. I further explore the points of contact between Islam and other religions and show the extent to which this presents conflicts and contradictions. I also seek to investigate how Allah is presented in the world of the text and the role he plays in it. Issues of fate, destiny, free will and choice that cause some of the characters to doubt Islamic beliefs and practices are also analysed in this discussion.

#### **4.1 Islam and other Religions and Traditions**

Ali invites the reader into the discussion on religion using Kumi, a central character in the story, 'The Prophet Of Zongo Street'. Kumi is a mail clerk at the central post office in Kumasi. Though Ali presents him as affectionate, Kumi's wife abandons him and runs away with their two sons because she thinks that Kumi is mad. In fact, the

people of Zongo Street also think that Kumi is mad because according to them he reads too much. The young narrator notes that:

Books were stacked everywhere inside Kumi's room –small books, large books, old books and even antique manuscripts that were written entirely by hand... (15, 16).

Kumi, at times talked to us about Socrates, Nietzsche, Kant, and Spinoza. My friends and I had no idea who these people were –I didn't even know what the word 'philosophy' meant at that time –but Kumi claimed that they were the greatest people who had ever lived and had tried, by means of their ideas, to re-create the world. He never explained to us why the ideas of these people failed (18).

Ali presents Kumi as a philosopher whose greatest interest is education, the quest for knowledge and wisdom. Kumi lives among the less educated Zongo Street people. The narrator also describes Kumi as reticent and shy, which makes him somewhat unapproachable, but his strength is that he is generous. According to the narrator, Kumi:

seldom mixed with the people and yet he was respected by almost everyone... his aloofness was not because he was Western educated and therefore considered himself as better than the street folks –a very common trait among such types on Zongo street and in the city. He was a person who devoted himself to his books and his 'thoughts' even though he did care for other people, especially the children (16, 17).

Ali thus presents Kumi as a character who commands the respect of the Zongo Street residents. They show him respect because Kumi does not flaunt his knowledge as do the other Western educated people of the Zongo Street community. Kumi's love for children is also mentioned as a very important part of his nature.

Yet Kumi's quest for more understanding of the world causes him to stop the young Muslim narrator friend from paying him any more visits as he says: 'I am beginning a serious study of the history of mankind, and so I want you to stop coming here' (22). After a long stay away from the public Kumi now begins to preach against foreign religions –Islam, (Zongo Street's predominant religion) and Christianity. This position taken by Kumi is what makes him significant in this discussion since he

opposes both the street's predominant religion –Islam –and Christianity. And when Kumi starts his proselytizing whose central message is the promotion of, and return to, the African Traditional Religion, the Zongo Street Muslim community begins to think that 'Kumi had gone insane because he had read too many books' (25).

Among the books Kumi reads are those on theology: the Bible, the Qur'an, and the lost books of Moses. Kumi searches for truth in these readings to see which religion is worth following. But his search for truth is thwarted when he finds that all of these foreign books fail to provide him with, in his words, 'the actual history of mankind', especially that of the African. In Kumi's study of history and whether it presents a consistent view of a people, he observes: "that the history of the world was somehow fabricated by the white man... They changed everything in the original book of the scriptures and filled it with false dogmas that suited their own greedy intentions" (21). He questions the veracity of the claims made by the various foreign religions of which Islam is part. He seeks to challenge the long held view that foreign religions are the only ones that can give the African answers to their difficulties. Ali seems to subvert this view by using Kumi, who, having rejected the view of alien religions on the history of the African, reads about philosophy and African religion in a book which Kumi gives the child narrator. The narrator reports:

He also gave me a book that was entitled *Manifestations* and urged me to read it as soon as I could... It was written in 1932 by one Anthony Mtoli, a self-proclaimed "Africanist and Spiritualist" whom I had never heard of before. The book called for a universal rebellion against "white dominance" and was full of curses and diatribes on Europeans, Arabs, and all white-skinned people. It was shocking and scary. I was brought up not only to revere Arabs and their culture, but to see them as a paragon of beauty, virtue, and spirituality. Islam was my religion. And Islam's prophet was himself Arab (22, 23).

Ali's presentation of Islam is further seen in the impact of *Manifestations* on the central character and child narrator. The book makes the boy begin to be sceptical

about the Islamic religion he has been brought up to believe in. It also promotes the worth of the African while condemning foreigners. The brainwashed young Muslim child narrator now realizes that the deep reverence he has for the Arab Muslims is beginning to diminish. According to the narrator:

At the madrassa, or Islamic school, I was led to believe that all white people were geniuses and daredevils, and that Arabs were divine among humans. And there I was, reading that some ‘Arab Invaders’ had once waged wars against black people in West Africa, and in the process of that war, had enslaved my ancestors and forced them to convert to Islam. For the first time I realized that there actually was a period in history when the people of my tribe, Hausa, weren’t Muslims at all. Before I read *Manifestations* I never doubted that humanity itself began with Islam, and that God had chosen a prophet among the Arabs because they were morally and spiritually superior to the rest of humankind” (23).

Ali uses *Manifestations* to confront what Islam (and indeed all other alien religions) stands for. In *Manifestations* is represented the basis for an African faith, different from and contrary to the ‘lies’ propagated by the Arabs and the Europeans. *Manifestations* represents the truth about the African and his history, religion and philosophy. It therefore promotes Africanism –giving Africans hope and admonition that they should not allow themselves to be ‘tossed about by any wind of doctrine’ that blows from the East or the West because meaning can be found in the African civilization itself. Ali, in Kumi and the silent and secret convert –the narrator – preach a rebellion against white supremacy, acculturation and ideology. He condemns the supposed superiority of Arabs and their religion, Islam, over the rest of mankind. That Africans have only been brainwashed and hoodwinked into believing in a culture that is not theirs, is captured in the manner in which Ali presents *Manifestations* and what it teaches. He presents Islam and Arabs starting from a seemingly positive perspective to the negative, in conclusion. He then elevates the African culture and religion in the conclusion thereby privileging African religion. Ali subtly but overtly condemns the aliens as racist, chauvinistic, egotistic, deceptive, ignorant, and in fact, ungodly.

Therefore, if they were not ungodly and ignorant, they would surely accept their religion and culture as theirs while African religion and culture remain African.

The narrator's rejection of the supposed superior morality and spirituality of the Arabs and their religion is clear. For, how could the Arab Muslims who claim to be morally and spiritually superior use brute force to compel others to accept Islam when they themselves in their thievery, lechery, ill-intentioned quest for power and dominance invade African lands and pillage its wealth? According to Kumi:

The Christian and Islamic intuitionists came and asked our ancestors to look up into the sky, to look up to Heaven, while they filled their ships with our gold, young men and women, timber, diamonds, cocoa –the list is endless (27).

On the subject of the looting of Africa's wealth, Armah's narrator in *Two Thousand Seasons* has this to say about the Arab Muslims when they imposed themselves on the Africans:

When the white predators from the desert came a second time, they found a brood of men ready to be tools for their purpose. This time again the predators came with force –to break our bodies. This time they came with guile, also –a religion to smash the feeblest minds among us, then turn them into tools against us all. The white men from the desert had made a discovery precious to predators and destroyers: the capture of the mind and the body both is a slavery far longer lasting, far secure than the conquest of bodies alone (Armah, 1973, 2000: 67).

Armah who predates Ali in this observation is no less blunt in exposing the evil intentions of the Arab Muslims towards the African cohorts (the askaris), corrupt chiefs and innocent victims. And Ali shows that the supposed spiritual and moral superiority of the Arab Muslims is unfounded and a blatant lie given their moral turpitude. He also shows that Islamic 'holy men' apply subterfuge and plunder to satisfy their greed for materialism. He finds that the religion is not interested in the propagation of any Arabo-Islamic spirituality or morality, for the foregoing is clearly contradictory to any spiritual and moral uprightness. Ali and Armah both attest to the

Arab Muslims using both deception and physical force in their bid to rule over the African.

The relationship among the various religions in *The Prophet of Zongo Street* shows Ali's way of revealing Muslim characters' attitude to the other religions and vice versa. He also vehemently attacks the Africans for their gullibility and greed for material things stolen from them and given back to them by the aliens, and laments the rejection of their own culture, religion and spirituality. Kumi notes that:

For hundreds of years you people have been led astray. You have been made to bow down to the images of false prophets and gods, thinking that you are worshipping the supreme ruler of the universe, Tigare himself. Look around you here. Look at the poverty in which you live: look at the misery, the ignorance, the disease. And yet you continue to worship their so-called Gods (25, 26).

Kumi's claim that the African has been deceived is like Armah's portrayal of the African's veering off 'the way our way' in *Two Thousand Seasons*. Armah, one of the uncompromising 'irreverents' of Islam, argues that there is an African way that has been ignored by Africans themselves. He shows that the rejection of 'the way' is even more intensified in Africa's contact first with Islam and later with Christianity. The long time of humiliation, deception and poverty which the alien religions have created and is palpably felt, is exposed. Kumi thinks that the acceptance of foreign ways is a most unpardonable mistake made by Africans themselves. He suggests that Islam (and the others) ought to have been able to make life more meaningful for the African but this is not the case. He asks what the sense is in discarding one's own culture and civilization in favour of alien ones which, instead of bettering the lives of those who discard it, rather worsens their plight. That is why Kumi's wisdom causes him to reject these alien religions, and revolt against them. From his stance, such religions are to be rejected for a return to a true African philosophy, religion and civilization. To Kumi, it is unthinkable to see the prevalence of the worst forms of rot

in Africa with Islam (and others) around and still think that they have anything better than what the African himself originally believes, ‘The Way, Our Way’.

There is yet another attack on Africans –their avaricious materialism which is similar to the greedy ways of the intrusionist Muslims and Christians. Kumi remarks:

And why didn't we question the Arabs, who bought and sold our ancestors into slavery, while preaching to us that their religion is one of peace and equality? Because you know what, Brothers and Sisters, it was because we allowed our minds to be carried away by false promises of gold, wicked glory, and eternal redemption that is nothing but a hoax (27)!

At once, Ali shows that there is historical evidence to suggest that Islam does not represent the peace it claims to espouse. For how can a religion claim to represent peace when it does not allow others to have the same peace? There is a clear contradiction in the essence of Islam because it is not a pleasant thing for other human beings to find themselves as slaves of the so called peace propagators, the Arab Muslims. Ali's whiplash, just like Armah's in *Two Thousand Seasons* does not attack the Arabo-Islamic 'holy men' alone. Ali exposes the Africans' greed for wealth by attacking their unthinking readiness to give, and their unfettered hospitality which commits them to trade their own tradition and religion for Islam, and the others. Ali condemns the African's vanity and their corrupt acquisition of wealth, a key factor that contributes to their hasty acceptance of Islam and the other religions. He shows, through Kumi, that boldness in telling historical truth is essential to coming out with 'the way' for today and for the future generations.

Ali further condemns the narrator's mother in so far as the issues of colour, race and ethnicity are concerned. The boy's dream that he saw black angels carrying Kumi to Heaven is immediately condemned by his Muslim mother who warns him not to mention a thing like that again. To his mother, this is an 'ominous dream' not to be

made known to anybody because her ideologised mind tells her that angels are not supposed to be black, and also because they will not, in fact cannot carry Kumi (a self-proclaimed Afromadiyyan preacher) to Heaven. This is because Islam itself condemns such people as evil, and condemned to hell fire. So the boy's dream only contradicts Islam's unyielding belief that only Muslims can go to Heaven. Clearly, the colour question has been brought up in this tension between Islam and African tradition and religion represented by the Afromadiyyan faith that Kumi espouses and preaches.

The Muslim narrator is torn between acceptance and rejection of Kumi's doctrines basically because on the one hand the Islamic beliefs he inherited have been almost indelibly planted in his mind. On the other hand the narrator finds that there is some sense in Kumi's arguments in defense of African culture, religion and philosophy. For the narrator, his Islamic faith has no solid basis in his African culture anymore. Therefore, the seeming confluence of cultures and religions is beginning to give way to the obvious variance that Kumi is now revealing. Islam is now in danger of being rejected by the Muslim child narrator who represents a continuation of the Islamic faith and yet who, because of Kumi's influence on him, begins to doubt his Islamic faith. The narrator rejects confluence. What is really happening or has been happening while Islam finds space on the African soil is that it has been going through the process of submerging the continent's culture and religion.

Kumi's argument implicitly shows that the two –Islamic tradition and African traditions –are at polar ends. Ali portrays the view that what is African is African and what is alien is alien, thereby seeming to retell Armah's account of the African's "The Way, Our Way". To further strengthen this manner of representation of the African 'way', revisiting the nightmarish story about the black angels will reveal more. The

narrator's dream about black angels is significant because it seeks to heal every warped mind that is based on perceptions of Arab and European superiority in favour of the original African culture. It is an encouragement to blacks to see themselves as worthy of acceptance here in this physical world, and the world beyond, although they are not White Muslim, or Black Muslim, but black African traditionalists. To Kumi however there is no such thing as the world beyond; he considers such a thing as 'a hoax' crafted by the foreign religions to deceive Africans. Ali, therefore, uses the symbol of the black angels to argue for hope, rather than despair, since for a long time, the brainwashed, ill-tutored African generally looks down on his own blackness but privileges Arabo-Islamic and Euro- Christian whiteness.

Although Ali privileges African culture and religion and unprivileges Islam, the manner in which he 'kills off' Kumi and has him buried by the imam of Zongo street raises a myriad of disturbing questions. Even before Ali 'kills off' Kumi he presents him as having 'no known converts' which is also distasteful to the neo-African traditionalist of his work. It waters down the so far strong argument in favour of African culture rather. This nevertheless, is Ali's way of showing that in reality not many out there are propagating the African religion. Not many are out there coming out in bold rejection of alien Islamic religion and bold acceptance of African religion. The few who are bold to come out with the African truth, 'The Way, Our Way' are often rejected. The 'killing' of Kumi by Ali is probably one of his artistic ways of presenting a case of reality and truth; that indeed the African truth has been 'killed' by Islam and Christianity.

In spite of this , a counter argument could be that since there are those who succeed in their bid to bring about a shift of gear from the Islamic (and other alien religions') dominance, Kumi could have been kept alive with a least some converts, though not

many. However, a defense of Ali on this question is that the argument rests on ‘no known converts’. But we do not know everything and Ali does not tell us that there is no follower but that there is “no known convert”. The argument in this case spins around the use of the adjective ‘known’. Therefore, Ali could be absolved of this. His conclusion on the confused yet secretly convinced Muslim child narrator supports this. The narrator concludes:

a fourteen-year old like me wasn't supposed to ask questions anyway, especially if those questions raised doubts about Islam and any of our traditions. So I walked silently behind my father after the prayers, anxious to reach home so that I could read aloud, as a memorial passages from *Manifestations*, which was at that time tucked between the skin of my belly and the waistband of my khaki shorts (31).

The evidence given above suggests that as the fourteen year old narrator grows older he might become a potential follower, or better put, preacher of Kumi's ‘new religion’ given the manner in which he plans to organize a loud memorial for Kumi albeit in hiding. The narrator's craft in hiding *Manifestations* ‘between the skin of [his] belly and khaki shorts’ expresses a silent yet loud defiance of the old Islamic order and a consideration of the African traditional past. For now, it seems that age is the narrator's key problem that he must live with. In the fourteen-year old narrator, silent ‘convert’, future disciple, and preacher of Kumi's unfinished business, Ali shows that all is not lost and that silent or dormant though the African interest and ideals might be now, there is some future “tucked between the skin” of the narrator's “belly and the waistband of his khaki shorts”. Ali, however, leaves the reader in suspense as to what will happen next. But the move towards African tradition supports Achebe's (1965) argument of the return to African culture. He appeals to African novelists to educate Africans about their culture; that the African culture is worth following by Africans.

Another technique that Ali uses to portray Islam is the paradox seen in the way the street imam gets himself involved in the burial of the traditionalist, Kumi. This act conflicts with the dictates of Islam. Islam does not tolerate unbelievers and so the imam's prayers for and burial of Kumi provokes discussion. One would have thought that the burial of Kumi should have been done by people of his kind, but since we have been told that there are 'no known converts', it suggests that no one would bury him. In fact, the only potential 'traditionalist' that can bury him is the fourteen-year old silent convert. But since he is not old enough to do this the body will have to lie rotting to the discomfort of all the residents of Zongo Street. It therefore seems that the potential discomfort in the bad smell that would diffuse from the decomposing body of Kumi propels the imam to break the rules of Islam, to prevent it. In this situation we find a confrontation between the Islamic regulation and the non-Islamic physical realities. To satisfy the immediate pragmatic physical needs of the community the Islamic ritualistic credo which bars every 'good' Muslim from having anything to do with unbelievers, pagans and infidels is sacrificed. The narrator observes that:

Everything about Kumi's funeral was carried out hastily. Instead of the three to seven days that were usually spent mourning and praying for the dead, not even a full day was spent for him ... and they could not wait for the imam's closing prayers, so that they could leave and attend to their personal affairs (30).

The attitude of the entire community including the imam's does not show any love for the traditionalist, Kumi. The hasty manner in which his funeral is held suggests that the community, led by the imam, is simply engaged in an activity of doing away with a real physical discomfort that will occur and not that Islam expresses any toleration and love for the already condemned traditionalist, Kumi. Again, it shows that religious and spiritual needs should wait for the physical needs to be satisfied before

any room is given to the spiritual. This being the case, Islam seen through the imam and the other Muslim believers, has bowed to social pressure. This is another of Ali's literary devices in presenting the case of conflict. However, in another sense, the same situation can be read as toleration and ethical because the burial ceremony he performs for Kumi is an act of goodness in itself. Yet, it contradicts the Islamic prohibition that corpses of such non-believing pagans are not to be approached or touched. Ali creates a friction here. The imam therefore has disobeyed one Islamic prohibition so as to do away with the reality of the stench that soon will hit them.

#### **4.2 Of Socio-economic Realities and Islamic [Religious] Issues and The Portrayal of Allah in the World of the Text with Particular Reference to 'Live-In'**

The perception of Allah in the novel is revealed in several ways, one of which is the way the female character, Shatu, confronts her wretched situation in the home of the old lady, Marge, and Roger on Long Island in "Live-In". Shatu arrives in the United States of America on the invitation of her sister, Rakiya. She invited her to find a job in the U S A because Shatu had been widowed with no bequest for her three orphaned children at Zongo Street. The troubles she goes through in the U S A seem to have been alleviated by Allah. In her visits to her relatives she wishes to relate this to them but stops short lest she be seen as complaining too much "... or, even worse, seem ungrateful for 'what Allah has given her'". Shatu, therefore, decided to internalize her fear, though it was eating her up day by day, and to pray to Allah to soothe her heart. But when the time came for her to return to Long Island, a place she could only think of as a necessary evil in her life, Shatu was filled with utmost sadness and a renewed fear of the loneliness that awaited her" (45).

Ali presents the poor Shatu in a way that brings the image of Allah in the text into disrepute. Here, Shatu seems to say that Allah should be or has been associated with evil and discomfort, for “What Allah has given her” is something distressing. The Muslim characters’ inability to fathom the problem of evil and suffering along with Allah’s perfect goodness creates a paradox. Allah himself is seen as the dispenser of evil and of suffering, and this proffers an answer to the argument theodicy throws up. It can be inferred that since Allah is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and morally good he should be held responsible for allowing evil to exist for people to battle it when he can stop it. For, it seems that the discomfort the Muslims undergo is what largely causes them to be confused and therefore contradict themselves on the demands of the religion. But this is not as simple as that. Islamic belief has it that Allah cannot be associated with evil. Therefore, for Shatu to think that the evil and pain “Allah has given her” is indeed given her by Allah, is in contradiction with the belief that Allah cannot be associated with evil. For, how can Allah, who is perfectly good and all-knowing, everywhere-present and all-powerful, not stop an evil thing that contradicts his perfect goodness? Ali’s character, Shatu, thinks about this and is held in a fix about this seemingly unending maze of religious and philosophical enigma.

Again, when Shatu realizes that her lost \$200 cannot be found she claims: “Okay, no problem. Everything is the work of God.” (49). This goes further to associate evil and discomfort with Allah. The philosophy of religion in attempting a logical response to theodicy, gives a proposition that there should be a limited deity concept. This argument shows either that there is no omnipotent Allah or that there is Allah but he is not perfectly good. However, this theory could be flawed in the sense that it renders Allah an object not worthy of worship due to the inferred limitation of his powers.

Such a situation is not a comfortable one for religious people. Ali brings this enigma to light although instead of limiting the deity of Allah, it will appear safe to argue that nothing escapes Allah's eyes and that both good and evil are things Allah decides to give whomever he pleases. If so, then the religious philosophy that blames humans for evil leaves itself open to questioning. For how could people be blamed for things they do not have a hand in since "everything," says Shatu, "is the work of God"? The friction is intense in this enigma. In response to the torture that Shatu undergoes in the foreign land of Long Island, she laments: "if only the earth will open its mouth and swallow me up right at this moment .... It would be preferable to this torture (50)." There is plain contradiction in this. If Shatu really agrees to the idea that everything is from Allah then why is she now yearning to have the earth swallow her up unless she thinks that the earth swallowing her up is itself part of the work of God? Ali contributes to the arguments on evil versus good; pleasure versus pain that seem to have no definitive answers.

### **4.3 Islam, Gender, Marriage, Sex and Related Issues in**

#### **‘The Manhood Test’: the Humour Displayed**

Ali’s story, ‘The Manhood Test’, captures the tumultuous married life of a suddenly impotent Muslim man, Rafique. It is a story in which Ali exposes the weaknesses, contradictions and conflicts of the Islamic religion in a humorous way. The picture that Rafique’s resort to prayer creates after several fruitless attempts to have sex with his sexually active but sexually starved young wife, Zulaika, is taken up in this discussion. Ali brings up the religious argument on the validity, usefulness and efficacy of prayer along with God’s will. He engages in, and invites the reader to also engage in the endless argument on whether or not prayer can change the mind and will of God. Shall man decide for God or shall God decide for man? Or will there be some kind of compromise or some midway acceptance for both divinity and humanity? The reason for these questions is that prayers do not solve Rafique’s problem. Rafique however consoles himself thus: “Allah is the cause of all things” (61) .... “He alone knows what is happening.” Ali shows through Rafique that Rafique’s inability to have sexual intercourse with his wife is Allah’s doing. And this is to say that Allah does not want Rafique and his new wife to enjoy sex. This thought is similar to Shatu’s belief that her problem at Long Island is ‘the work of Allah’. It also shows Allah’s omniscience, omnipotence and moral goodness and yet Allah prevents Rafique from sexually satisfying himself and his young wife.

Other thoughts that come to Rafique’s mind are his fellow Muslim characters’ speculation that he is suffering the consequences of his wrongdoings. Perhaps it is a test of his faith to see how he would react as Allah plans to bless him later with sexual happiness. Ali presents Rafique as a character who contradicts himself: it is he, Rafique, who says that Allah is responsible for all things – even his inability to

perform. And yet, now, because of a more intense frustration, he starts to believe in something which is in contradiction with Islamic beliefs: “As time went by, Mr. Rafique assumed the un-Islamic and ungodly act of blaming “old witches” on the street for his problems” (62). This is to suggest that now it is not Allah who is to blame but old witches. It suggests that Rafique is unsure what exactly the cause of his problems is. His faith therefore oscillates between Allah and witchcraft. This exposes Rafique as being really frustrated about life in the Islamic religion he has grown up to believe in. Rafique’s problems are not only due to his status as a Muslim but also to his being human since existence is itself fraught with unfathomable difficulties.

Rafique’s impotence and Zulai’s sexual starvation which have created a lot of confusion between them and their two families, lead to a lot of other complications: Zulai’s family resorts to a charlatan Mallam, or medicine man who proclaims that, ‘Zulai was visited by men of night, bad spirits who copulated with married women in their sleep and destroyed their pregnancies’ (66). While this goes on, Rafique also sees another Mallam who claims that the problem is a curse sent by Rafique’s rival who had actually wanted to marry Zulai. And so the Mallam offers a talisman to Rafique. “The medicine man swore, and gazed at the ceiling in supplication to Allah, as he handed Mr. Rafique the tiny red amulet” (67). The position taken by Zulai’s family and Rafique presents contradictions. On the one hand these Muslims believe that evil spirits from all over the land destroy Zulai’s pregnancies while on the other they believe that Rafique has been cursed by a rival. This is the situation the two families, in spite of their Islamic faith, believe in and attempt to make the wretched couple believe as well. This situation further adds to Ali’s techniques on how faithful Islamic characters deal with existential problems. Ali makes a mockery of these

Islamic holy men, the Mallams, in the lies they tell their fellow Islamic brothers and sisters. Ali's description of the Mallam as a "medicine man" reduces the man's value as a Muslim and places him in the animist category. Or it is a blend of the contraries. Ali attacks this behaviour since, according to Islam, these things are unacceptable. And yet Islamic characters contradict themselves by yoking themselves with the very contradictory force of animism.

Ali presents a worse form of the situation when the Mallam's prescription of the amulet is not able to restore his potency – a thing which makes Rafique feel very distraught:

Rafique felt he had been conned by the Mallam and the spiritual bodies he had invoked for his "miracles". What was worse, Mr. Rafique felt slighted by Allah, to whom he prayed daily to save his marriage. At this point he gave up all hope and waited for the day when Allah, in his infinite mercy, would make good His promise to help those who cry out to Him in their times of need (67).

Ali's presentation of the deceitful Mallam exposes the lack of true faith of the 'Islamic holy men'. In this case some 'Islamic holy men', for the sake of the money they want from victims, only use the religion as a means to achieve their selfish materialistic ends and therefore tarnish its image. These are the hypocrites and charlatans that Ali exposes. Also, Ali's reference to Rafique as feeling "slighted" by Allah, throws up an argument: Rafique thinks that once there is a problem Allah should solve it for him at once rather than have him wait for so long –a thing that makes Rafique's desperate situation even worse and causes the faith in him to flicker. For, it is following from this dilemma that Zulai seeks a divorce since her husband, Rafique, cannot perform. Moreover, Ali brings up some key Islamic elements or preconditions for a divorce. The narrator relates that:

According to Islamic Sharia law, a wife can seek a divorce from her husband on three conditions: (1) if he doesn't provide 'chi da sha', or food and drinks for her, (2) if she deems there's no love between herself and her husband and (3) if he is sick, or impotent. A husband on the other hand is not bound by any strict stipulation and may divorce his wife at will (68).

The image of Islam that Ali portrays here would seem to keep the couple's marriage in check and in shape. It shows that the husband should be responsible, loving, and virile. The inability to meet these standards could result in the dissolution of a marriage. Such a standard, though, rejects society's hope for permanence in marriage. Zulai's argument which is based on the third point in the quote holds some water especially since the marriage has not been consummated, but at the same time it questions what Islam itself is capable of doing about this. If, as the Mallam predicted, the problem has been cast on Rafique by an evil force, then why does Allah not counter this by making Rafique 'perform' to show that Islam has more power than the evil force especially when Rafique has prayed? Or is it that his inability to have an erection is also 'the will of Allah'? Like the endless argument on fate and destiny, this situation is a difficult one to fathom. It is impossible to say whether Rafique is destined, fated for, or has chosen what he finds himself in. This generates endless questions requiring endless answers.

Also, Ali portrays differences in the standards set for women and men in the Islamic religion. Whereas women will have to present 'good' reasons for a divorce, men need not have any. This case in Islam exposes the religion's unfairness to the cause of women – an attempt to subordinate them – to make the man superior while the woman becomes the inferior partner. The sad case that Ali reveals here is that Islam which should seek equality for all manner of people is rather widening the gap – making some superior and privileged while others remain inferior and unprivileged.

The issue of Islam and polygamy is also portrayed in 'The Manhood Test'. Zulai's disgust with polygamy reveals a revolt against that standard because, to her, it turns women into mere objects to be used by men, a situation which does not paint a good image of Islam. This is because Islam allows polygamy but Zulai categorically rejects it. The narrator presents Zulai's position thus:

Most of the men who still sought Zulaikha's hand were rich ones also from Zongo Street, with two or three wives already, a practice sanctioned by Islam, the street's predominant religion. To Zulaikha, the idea of competing for a man's attention with two or three other women along with its concomitant sexual starvation seemed repugnant and stifling (56).

This situation represents the Islamic position on polygamy: that, it has been subverted by Zulai in her acceptance of the ordinary and poor Muslim man, Rafique. The question of freewill and choice on the one hand and that of the Islamic sanction which commits children to be obedient to their parents in such cases on the other complicates the situation. Though the Islamic sanction seems to remain unshaken, Zulai still has her freewill to decide on the man she will marry. Yet, her choice of a man against the collective wish of her parents and that of the Muslim community is one of the reasons that has resulted in the situation in which she finds herself. Therefore the conflict is between her acceptance of the Muslim community norms and her individual disposition, freewill and choice. Ali thus creates a tension between the Islamic collective interest and the individual Islamic interest on the question of marriage. And though the individual interest carries the day, the consequence for the couple is a sad one. Yet the collective Islamic interest itself will have to bear its own pitfalls of subverting the individual wish. For, where there are no individuals there cannot be the collective. The problem rests in which of the two –the collective or the individual –should be the rule in such a perplexing situation.

Ali makes a mockery of the Muslim characters in the scene in which Rafique is unable to perform in secret with his wife, but is compelled to prove his virility in the open regardless of the psychological implications. The picture this paints about Zongo Street and its predominant religion, Islam, of which the distraught couple is part, is not a palatable one. This is yet another way in which Ali can be categorized under the group of the 'irreverents' but it seems that he has the intention of revealing the weaknesses of the Islamic religion for a change of attitude. The impression about Islam that Ali creates as he exposes the open sex act between a married Muslim couple to verify the authenticity of the man's claim to virility and the woman's claim otherwise, is brought up. Also Ali questions the Islamic community's view that Rafique's penis had been cooked by evil spirits. He shows that such a view does not portray a positive Islamic image. Rafique's refusal to perform the public sex act and his decision instead to grant Zulai the divorce shows his defiance of the Muslim community's resort to such a reprehensible public sex display. It also castigates the role of the charlatan Muslim old woman umpire, the 'lafiree'. It questions the old woman's claim to having expertise in determining whether or not a man is able to have sex with a woman. Ali's mockery of the charlatan Muslim old woman's refereeing ability is biting and exposes her as a liar and a fraudster. Interestingly, Islamic holy men and women sadly encourage and participate in such a ludicrous act. The Muslim community has, in this act, resorted to frivolity to corrupt the sanctity of Islam.

Ali brings up another issue that portrays a negative attitude to Muslim characters. Rafique's worry about his inability to have sex with his wife causes him to resort to alcoholism, something that Islam is very much against. Rafique claims that this state of alcoholism gives him peace: "Mr. Rafique had never before experienced such inner

peace. They can drown themselves if they don't like the way I live" (80)! Ali suggests that what Islam and prayer have not been able to do, alcohol has done it. This case is in contradiction with Islam's vehement opposition to alcohol. This is a 'scathing mockery' of Rafique who misrepresents Islam. I find from the various evidence in the discussion that the image of Islam painted by Ali in 'The Manhood Test' is not a palatable one.

#### **4.4 Of Socio-economic Realities, Marriage, Peace, and Violence:**

##### **An Islamic Response in 'Mallam Sile'**

In 'Mallam Sile', the central character, Mallam Sile, paints a somewhat positive image of Islam. In Ali's further representation of Islam, Mallam Sile, a Muslim tea seller, refuses to seek any medical assistance – not orthodox, not traditional. He argues that: "God is the one who brings illness, and he is the only true healer." (152) He argues against any form of orthodox medicine and other kinds of healing. The narrator describes Mallam Sile's physical condition thus:

A childhood sickness that deteriorated Sile's vision had continued to plague him throughout his adult life. Yet he refused to go to hospital and condemned any form of medication –traditional or orthodox. "God is the one who brings illness, and he is the only true healer. That was Sile's simple, if rather mystical, explanation" (152).

This suggests that Mallam Sile associates his suffering with Allah and commits him to implying that Allah is the one who causes people to suffer sickness. Another side of Mallam Sile's argument could be that he is sure that if anyone is attacked by any sickness, like the various deformities he Mallam Sile suffers, it does not escape the eyes of Allah, and therefore once Allah has allowed it, then he is the only one who knows why such evil happens to his followers. Mallam Sile therefore accepts his dwarfism and poor sight as something imposed on him by Allah. And, once these, he

believes, come from Allah, it is no problem at all. It shows Mallam Sile's stoicism and somewhat strong faith in Allah or perhaps his misinterpretation or naïve contribution to issues as subtle as disease, pain and suffering that religious people and philosophers have long been battling with. His claim imputes the blame of suffering to Allah. Yet, at the same time since Allah himself causes the illness Mallam Sile observes that Allah is the only one, not any man or woman from either the African or Western society, capable of solving it. This shows how Ali associates both evil and good, pain and pleasure with Allah. Yet at the same time, Ali paints a good picture of Mallam Sile as a very faithful Muslim who will not be shaken no matter how adverse the circumstances are. This is one point at which Islam seems to be represented in a somewhat positive light though Mallam Sile sometimes reveals himself as plainly ignorant and naïve.

Another way Ali presents Mallam Sile is in his (Mallam Sile's) clothing. Mallam Sile's clothing shows him as a devout Muslims: He "was never seen without his white embroidered Mecca hat – worn by highly devout Muslims as a reflection of their submission to Allah" (153). Ali presents clothing as a symbol of submission to the will of Allah. The symbol of the Islamic dress used by Ali reveals Mallam Sile's commitment to his faith in Allah, so that at a first glance even without asking, one is immediately aware of the kind of religion Mallam Sile represents. Yet his wife, who has hitherto remained faithful by keeping her veil on, finally conforms to the street's principles by discarding her veil. This is another of Ali's technique of creating a contrast.

Ali presents Mallam Sile as a character with a clean heart and a pure mind. Mallam Sile is never retributive to the buyers who swindle him by using fake currency and banned cedi notes to purchase his wares. Mallam Sile argues that it is hunger that

causes them to do that, which is to say that but for dire need, Mallam Sile thinks, the swindlers will do otherwise: ‘he believed that it was hunger –and not mischief –that had led the rascals to cheat him. Since Mallam Sile considers it ‘inhuman to refuse a hungry person food’ (155) he allows them to get away with their frauds. Ali tells us through Mallam Sile that evil is practised by people especially because of the difficult straits in which they find themselves. In response, Ali presents Mallam Sile also as a very tolerant and forgiving Muslim. Mallam Sile does not retaliate when out of their pranks they blow out the flames of his lanterns causing him to spill his tea, and often steal some of his wares. Ali also shows that Mallam Sile’s piety is even more seen in his speech which is filled with reference to the Heavens.

Mallam Sile is presented not only as a stoic but also a character who accepts himself as a unique individual different from all others, a thing which makes Mallam Sile receive praise in his representation of the Islamic religion. Ali exalts Mallam Sile’s virtues “though in their eyes [of the streets rascals] Sile was only a buffoon”. (156). Here, Ali portrays that the impressive view one may have about another person’s virtue could be different from what the one practising the virtue sees. The manner in which the street folk create bad blood between the two Muslims – Mallam Sile and Alhaji Saifa, the provision seller –when Mallam Sile expands his tea selling business, is another of Ali’s way of representing the religion. Mallam Sile is resolute in his faith in Allah and does not allow himself to be used by the street folk to renege on his fervent belief in Allah and what he demands of him. But the artificial antagonism that the street folk create between Mallam Sile and Alhaji Saifa, according to the narrator, ‘eventually creates bad blood between Mallam Sile and Alhaji Saifa.’ Ali shows here that Mallam Sile’s tolerance of the pranks of the street folk creates a tension between the two Muslim brothers. But to Mallam Sile this will not move him into doing any

seriously bad thing that will dent the image of the Islamic religion he so strongly believes in.

There is another contrast between Abongo the other tea seller and Mallam Sile. Though Ali does not tell us the religious inclination of Abongo, he at least tells us that he is also a northerner, like Mallam Sile. The difference Ali creates is that whereas Mallam Sile is tolerant and forgiving, Abongo is mean and vindictive. For instance Abongo would not sell his tea on credit and if anyone made any unnecessary noise in his shop he 'chased the customer out of the shop, brandishing his bullwhip and cursing after him: "if your mama and papa never teach you manners, I'll teach you some. You bastard son of a bastard woman" (158). The contrast between these two northerners throws more light on the praise of the Islamic faithful, Mallam Sile. Although a part of Sile's actions results from his personal generosity, more can be attributed to Islam, which his choice of words shows. Mallam Sile always makes references to Heaven, Angels and morality in his interaction with his neighbours on Zongo Street. It is another of Ali's way of pointing out something positive about Islam.

Ali creates a conflict between Islamic piety and economic prosperity in Mallam Sile. The mallam finds it hard to get a woman to marry because of his physical deformities even though he makes every effort to boost his tea business. His shop does not make progress due to his piety in extending credit to non-paying customers. Immediately, the narrator tells us that contrary to Mallam Sile 'malice seemed to lurk behind Abeebe's cheerful smile' (158). And when his business begins to improve it is mainly as a result of his marriage to Abeebe, the physically strong and brave woman, a characteristic which Ali uses as a complement to Mallam Sile's physical weaknesses. Abeebe, though also a Muslim, refuses to be overly religious much unlike her

husband. To Abeebe the material and economic advantage must hold sway, and strict adherence to patience and forgiveness, key principles of Islam, must be held down, at least temporarily, so that their material needs will be met. The two –husband and wife – contradict each other in the attitude to the economic strings, and the Islamic religion they believe in.

Ali also shows that the predominantly Muslim inhabitants of Zongo have cultivated a lukewarm attitude to Islam. Unlike the usual female Muslim residents of Zongo Street who have abandoned the wearing of the Islamic veil that signifies their marriage, Abeebe, the wife, indifferent to Zongo Street culture, continues to wear the marriage veil. Yet, Ali mocks even this. The reason is that the wearing of the veil is supposed to signify unshaken faithfulness to the ideals of Islamic marriage. But, Abeebe does not conform to the ideals of Islam the way Mallam Sile does and therefore Ali uses her to create a contrast to make Mallam Sile appear as a distinctly peace loving man who now has to live with the clearly violent Abeebe. To Abeebe, Islam is an impediment to advancing their immediate economic interest. This leads to an investigation of what it is that makes Abeebe violent. The need to ensure the growth of the business is what preoccupies Abeebe's mind. Yet to Abeebe, a careful study of the 'pious' way by which her husband manages the tea business, if it continues in that carefree way, will cause it to head for doom. Abeebe wonders how long Mallam Sile will go on forgiving the street folk's pranks and debts. To Abeebe, if Mallam Sile's business management style continues that way, the business will collapse. Therefore, strict obedience to Islamic commands will have to be sacrificed to cater for the interest of the business and their sustenance.

With the presence of Abeebe the norms in Mallam Sile's business begins to change: one of which is that instead of Mallam Sile accepting Abeebe's suggestion that they

adopt Alhaji Abongo's 'no credit policy', the two finally decide that they will have their creditors 'swear by the Koran' to get extension of credit repayment deadline. The 'good' image of Islam, which Mallam Sile has so far relatively well represented, is now damaged. Prior to Abeebe's coming into Mallam Sile's life he had never asked anybody to swear by the Koran to ensure the payment of the debt they owed him yet the 'tea selling business' was not bad. But now that Abeebe is around, a change occurs. The Koran has now been used as a means of coercion or fear and terror to get people to pay their debt much to Mallam Sile's displeasure. Yet again, when Abeebe realizes that even this method of the use of the Koran in frightening debtors to pay their debts does not work well to their satisfaction she resorts to the use of force, something which her bulky physique easily allows. Abeebe, after three peaceful but futile attempts to collect a debt owed them by the town's most notorious boy – Samadu –decides to use force. But still Mallam Sile would rather she left that boy alone because to him he is dangerous. There we are with another contrast in the disposition and behaviour of the Muslim couple: the woman represents violence while the man represents peace.

Ali shows through Abeebe that predominant deviant life of fighting, nonpayment of debt, swindling, gossip, and thievery at Zongo Street are infectious and do not spare anyone who lives in it. A typical example is Abeebe, perhaps already violent before her coming into Zongo Street. She quickly conforms to the ways of Zongo Street, disdains her husband's advice to let go of Zongo Street's most notorious bully and debtor and goes straight to his house on a violent mission: "Abeebe had therefore worn a sleeveless ready-to-fight shirt and a pair of tight fitting khaki shorts and for the first time ever, left her veil at home" (162). Abeebe drops the symbol of peace and submission –the veil –and goes ahead to engage in a fight and succeeds in beating up

Samadu. After her use of violence to retrieve the eighty Cedis she goes home, but meets Mallam Sile “engaged in his morning ‘Zikhr’ or meditation” (167). Another contrast is vividly shown in this: The wife has returned from a violent and ‘unholy’ mission which has resulted in the payment of Mallam Sile’s money but Mallam Sile is at this time engaged in a ‘holy’ act of praying, a sign of his Islamic spiritual piety. Ali mocks this situation because the Muslim ‘holy’ man of the spirit has been corrupted by his worldly centered materialistic Muslim wife. This adds to Ali’s portrayal of the contrast of the Muslim couple –the woman violent, unforgiving, and vindictive; the man docile, unassuming, forgiving, ‘holy’ and spiritual. Thus, this is one point in which we can argue that Ali ‘vacillates between praise and castigation of Islamic holy men’. Mallam Sile represents peace and reverence for Islam; Abeebeba represents the opposite. Yet at the same time Abeebeba’s behaviour, though violent, is a quest for justice and may not be totally negative. But still there is a problem in deciding where the Islamic religious demands should end for justice to begin.

Zongo Street’s inhabitants’ ‘respect’ now for Mallam Sile comes as a result of Abeebeba’s ‘unholy’ and violent thrashing of Samadu. But this conflicts with Islam’s peace ideals. This creates a contradiction with the Islamic religion which argues that its essence is peace and submission to the will of Allah. And so while Ali praises Mallam Sile for his faithfulness to the religion he at the same time gently mocks Abeebeba, for misrepresenting the religion. Yet, the violent move made by Abeebeba attracts some ‘respect’ for Mallam Sile though it is hitherto unknown to Mallam Sile how the sudden respect has come to him. However, although the act is unknown to Mallam Sile the Islamic religion that he and his wife should positively represent is rather negatively represented. The truth is that Mallam Sile does not know how the ‘respect’ has suddenly come about. Only Abeebeba, Samadu (Abeebeba’s defeated

victim), and the street folk know this. But Ali leaves us in suspense as to what the ‘pious’ Mallam Sile will do if he ever finds out.

Another representation of Islam that the narrator reveals is that “Sile and his wife burned ‘tularen mayu’, or witches lavender, a strong yet sweet-smelling incense that doubled as jinx repellent –to drive away bad spirits from the establishment” (159). Mallam Sile suggests that there is power in the jinx repellent; that his Islamic faith endorses it as an additional force that enables him to solve the problems he faces in the community. He suggests that these animist rituals complement Islam and help prop it up in its bid to solve problems.

The Islamic image depicted by Ali vacillates between the positive and the negative given the manner in which a few of his Muslim characters remain resolute while the majority engages in very bad behaviour, and contradict each other. Following from this I argue that the representation is more negative than positive.

#### **4.5 The Tension between Creed and Morals; Theism and Atheism in**

##### **‘Faith’**

Ali in this story appears to bring up the issue of the tension between the observance of creed and morals, and theism and atheism. He places the setting in the U.S. Washington Avenue – a Fort Greene spirit world neighbourhood using the central character of this story, Suf-yan, who finds himself in a dream state. The building in which he lives in the dream world of this story suddenly collapses and he finds himself amidst a large group of totally naked people – men, women, children and people from the length and breadth of the world, including the now resurrected dead and the still living. Suf-Yan also sees his ‘pious’ Muslim ex-wife, Ram-lah, in the

crowd of naked people. The ‘pious’ Ram-lah’s reason for filing a divorce against Suf-yan was that he was not committed to the Islamic religion. And so Ram-lah moved away with a ‘committed’ new Muslim husband to Atlanta Georgia. The setting is the dreamlike, spiritual, semi-conscious world. Ali captures what is believed will occur in ‘the last days’ since wakeful reality may not be able to appropriately capture such a lofty spiritual phenomenon. Or it shows that the end of the world as many religions including Islam have come to believe in is all a hoax since dreamlike states often find the dreamer in a state of illusion.

Ali introduces Suf-yan’s college professor, Alfred Johannsen: “whose Western thought prompted Suf-yan to seriously question the concept of religion” (172). Ali’s use of Johannsen in this nightmare throws more light on the Islamic religion. Islamic doctrine is now thrown into doubt because teachings in philosophy and other fields of learning begin to question the concept of religion. Ali uses Suf-yan to question his madrasa teacher on how the whole business of the Judgement Day was going to be like. For Suf-yan all the tale about the earth folding up like a mat, and people rising naked from their graves, is nonsensical. But, some fanatical and overly pious religious critics might claim that Suf-yan is only naïve about the issues of the Judgement Day. However, Ali uses him to show that there would be other reasons why the Judgement Day story was carved; one of which was to regulate human behaviour and that is what the narrator presents about Suf-yan:

Even as a twelve year old, Suf-yan had developed plenty of doubt about the Judgment Day; he thought of it as “a hoax, an attempt by humans to give meaning to life’s chaos and misery to make life worth living (173).

The apostate Muslim child’s thoughts and voice are charged with scepticism. It seems that the young Suf-yan would rather have totally believed because children naturally, usually, accept what is told them by their elders. But Suf-yan, even at this tender age

begins to question the veracity of and the sense in all of this. It is little surprise that professor Johanssen's "Western Thought" on the seeming nonsense of religion has a fertile ground in Suf-yan's mind to fall onto to fructify. Suf-yan's scepticism about the Judgement Day (Alyau Mul Quiyam) gets him to ask: "Is Allah going to wait for everyone to die before 'Alyau mul Quiyam' starts?" (173)

The madrasa teacher, detecting Suf-yan's intelligence and other questions that might follow, could only prevaricate and speculate: "Maybe not every human being would be dead by the day Allah decides to go to court ... but know that Allah does what he wants and at any time he wishes to and therefore he alone knows what is going to happen tomorrow" (173). The teacher's uncertainty of mind, his prevarication, and his resort to the autonomy, and omniscience of Allah, from the foregoing, reveals a struggle for a convincing and satisfying answer to such difficult questions. Therefore, to end it all, the will of Allah, which Islam claims cannot be compromised and questioned, is what finally becomes the seeming end and solution to the enigmatic questions asked by the young Suf-yan. But, Ali presents Suf-yan as a character who is dissatisfied with such religious incomprehensibilities and magic –a thing which, to Suf-yan throws Islamic belief, philosophy, truth and spirituality into doubt.

Again, Ali mocks the imprecision of the madrasa teacher's view of the day of judgement. That it was not the symbol of Moses' tablet of the Ten Commandments but a palm pilot which was used in the judgement. What this suggests about the Muslim teacher is that he is himself ignorant of what the end of the world (if to Suf-yan there is such a phenomenon) will be like. Ali suggests that perhaps the Islamic teachers and leaders themselves have missed the point, for how can a tablet, something they have always believed in as the symbol of judgement, suddenly turn into a palm pilot, except to show that the madrasa teachers themselves are liars, or

ignorant of what they preach? This suggests that the whole concept of the Judgement Day, with all its associated beliefs, is to be considered as unsubstantiated.

Another Islamic symbol that Ali uses is the Quaba, “the Black dome of Mecca”, which invites the Muslim world to rush to Mecca. The Mecca image and setting, though, created by Ali does not capture only the Muslim race but “the entire human race” (175). It suggests Islam’s claim to being the religion for all humanity. Yet, Ali questions the veracity of this claim.

Moreover, Ali presents the paganistic cohabitation between Suf-yan and Pas-cal and compares it with the Islamic marriage arranged between him and Ram-lah. The latter was fraught with turbulence in spite of its Islamic religious basis and approval. His new relationship with the painter, Pas- cal, though clearly un-Islamic, rather goes well. Ali would seem to be encouraging non- Islamic marital relationships but is at the same time likely to be arguing that it is not always the case that once you marry a Muslim partner your marriage will succeed. So, Ali suggests that religion is not supposed to stop partners from being together especially when they are truly compatible. But Suf-yan’s fear is much intensified when he remembers the fornication that has characterized his relationship with Pas-cal, even though the archangel has given Suf-yan amnesty on his refusal to follow Islamic credo while he was alive. He believes that the harsh Islamic creed and prohibitions would not spare him on this one. The pardon the archangel gives him indicates Ali’s way of telling the Muslim community that deeds are what should be emphasized. That is to say that doing things that do not harm the other person is what should be stressed to the rejection of empty credo and ritual.

Suf-yan's preoccupation now is the instinct for self-preservation at this time at the junction of life and death, hell and heaven. His madrassa teacher's ideology had been that: 'on that day not even your children, your mother, your father, or your wife will matter to you; each and everyone for himself and Allah for us all' (178). Suf-yan wonders if the Islamic religion he has given a half-hearted attitude to and has also been sceptical of has any power in saving him in this state. He finds that Islam has not a single good to offer him, and that the battle is his alone. To prove more of Suf-yan's doubts about Islam he questions his madrassa teacher on the existence of Allah; whether Allah would show himself to mankind on the day of judgement at least to authenticate his existence to anyone who doubts it. Strangely, he answers in the negative. For Suf-yan this is not convincing since Allah's manifesting of himself to mankind would establish the truth about Allah himself and to prove the sceptics including Suf-yan himself wrong. Ali brings this into the story to contribute to the argument on theism (the belief in the existence of God) and atheism (the belief in his nonexistence).

Ali presents Suf-yan as an infidel, a renegade, and an atheist but he does not condemn him. Instead he condemns the self-righteous fanatical Muslim characters for castigating Suf-yan as an infidel, a thing which, to them, should lead Suf-yan to hell.

The characters in this case are Samad, Razak and Rabi. The narrator tells us that:

they denounced him as an infidel when they heard about his life in New York. And being hard core extreme Islamists, they had refused to talk to Suf-yan for the remaining days of his visit, invoking the fundamentalist tenet that barred mu-mins (steadfast Muslims) from having anything to do with infidels and Muslims who have gone astray from their religious upbringing( 182, 183).

The foregoing exposes the self-righteousness of these Islamist fundamentalist characters who would not allow other characters, Suf-yan, for example, to have a choice as to what they will do with their lives – whether to be a Muslim or not. This

contributes to the overall presentation of Islam in that its followers see themselves as the only people capable of receiving salvation and thus excludes and condemns non-believers. It suggests that no act by any non-Muslim can be good and that goodness can only be practised by Muslims. This is a negative picture that Ali paints about the religion.

The protest against Suf-yan by the three Muslim fanatics is further intensified when they raise their voices against him for qualifying for Heaven; they argue:

Why is this man going to Heaven? It must be a mistake; they chorused. This man ate pork, lived and conducted business with non-believers, didn't even believe that a day like this would ever arrive, and on top of all that, he was a nonbeliever, too (183).

Ali continues to expose the harsh standards that extreme Islamist fundamentalists set for themselves and others. And once a person does not follow these standards the Muslims condemn him. He shows in the foregoing that moral values are more important to one's salvation than the observance of creed. That is why the angel opens the floor to anyone who has anything against Suf-yan concerning acts like Suf-Yan ever snatching their wives or doing anything that was offensive to their very persons. Seeing that the Islamic fundamentalist critics have nothing against him the angel incarcerates them into hell fire but sends the sceptic, even atheist, yet morally upright Suf-yan, to heavenly bliss. Ali clearly condemns anyone who passes judgement on another simply because of the person's failure to follow a religion and its dogma. He presents Suf-yan, the infidel and atheist as having gained heaven while the so called faithfuls suffer hell. Through this Ali privileges good deeds and plays down Islamic ritualistic credo. Ali's attitude to Islam in this case is humane and tolerant because the Muslims that practised virtue, as did the renegade Suf-yan, got saved. An example is the Muslim, Uncle Hassan, who though he drank alcohol, was full of good deeds and

so the angel considered him saved. To Ali, it is not our religion that counts but how we relate with all manner of people.

Moreover, from the way Ali presents the story he does not seem to argue that there is no heaven. He shows rather that the madrasa teacher's knowledge about Heaven may be flawed and unfounded. What the madrasa teacher and all the other Islamist fundamentalists and extremist characters get wrong is that only Muslims who follow the strict dogma will go to Heaven. From the way Ali presents the story about Suf-yan's society of which Islam is predominant we glean the need to encourage good deeds so that if Heaven exists, good deeds will be the requirement for admission and not Islamic creed and rituals.

Ali therefore expresses, through Suf-yan and his accusers, the need to express love for one another: The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1788) observes that there is one categorical imperative; that we should act only on that maxim whereby we can at the same time will that the action become a universal law of life and nature. This is summarized and made simpler in the "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you" universal philosophy. Ali is also educating the Muslim community, and indeed all other religious communities, to desist from passing judgement on one another but to concentrate on seeking, out of unqualified 'good will', the interest of other people. Suf-yan's accusers, forgetting or disregarding this law of love, will only be happy if they see him condemned not because he did not show love but simply because he reneged on following Islamic dogma.

The case of Suf-yan and his accusers also brings to mind the biblical story about the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in which two men stood up to pray in a temple: The self-righteous Pharisee praised himself on his fasting, payment of tithes,

praying, and other such things while audibly condemning the tax collector as a sinner. On the other hand the tax collector beats his chest in penitence and thus receives the favour of his Lord (Luke 18: 9-14). This parable is similar to the story of the renegade, atheist, freethinker Suf-yan in which he receives salvation while his Muslim accusers are condemned to hellfire. This is another of Ali's literary art of preaching against self-righteousness and the condemnation of others who hold beliefs different from theirs.

Yet another way Ali represents Islam is how the drunkard Muslim, Uncle Hassan, gets saved. Hassan's salvation adds to Ali's concentration on what should be considered important. Thus the angel remarks:

Your drinking alcohol didn't harm anyone and since you did it to hide your sorrows, Allah in his infinite mercy has decreed that you be sent to heaven, though with one condition: that you shall never enjoy or have a taste of the wine provided in Heaven (181).

Alcoholism which is so very much frowned upon in Islam is here brought up by Ali. Ali uses Uncle Hassan to condemn excesses. And yet, once the excess is not itself a moral offence against another person, Uncle Hassan gains Heaven. Again, Ali makes it clear that wine which is so vehemently condemned by Islamist extremists is served even in Heaven. So, why is there so much argument about something that is served in Heaven? Ali shows that there is value in everything except that users must be prudent in whatever they do. In this case he disagrees with the Islamic attitude that abhors the taking of alcoholic beverages. Therefore, it is one of the ways in which Ali turns some Islamic beliefs and practices on their head. He thus criticizes Muslims on the issue of wine intake. Yet, the fact that Uncle Hassan is denied access to the wine served in heaven complicates the argument. Does the angel suggest that if you want to taste the full blessing of heaven, you should wait till that time and not drink wine here on

earth? One would have thought that since the angel argues that the drinking of wine does not cause harm to anyone here on earth so must it not cause any harm to any of the members of the community of heaven. But here we are with the case that Hassan cannot enjoy the wine in heaven. It suggests that those who do not taste wine now will, in heaven, have their turn and those who did, have had their portion and can have no more. The fanatical extremist Muslim characters, like as happens in reality, would frown on the manner in which Ali handles the issue of wine intake since the Qur'an vehemently prohibits its intake. In Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, he exposes the drunken, lascivious and drug addict Muslim slave masters. And although the representation of Islam in *The Prophet Of Zongo Street*, I have argued, is negative, the discussion has shown some instances that render it positive. This is unlike Armah's straightforwardly 'radically negative' and hostile presentation.

This chapter has attempted to capture the manner in which Ali represents Islam in his work, *The Prophet of Zongo Street*. It has been found that the image of Islam revealed in his work is not a very good one, though compared with Armah, the totally 'irreverent,' Ali's work is much less negative. There is not a single admirable Muslim character in *Two Thousand Seasons* but we can find a few in *The Prophet Of Zongo Street*. Ali also makes a derision of many of the Muslim characters. The positive thing that Ali says about Islam is found in situations where the few Muslim characters privilege virtue and not creed.

Therefore where Armah, Ousmane and Kourouma categorically condemn Islam and indeed all foreign religions, Ali condemns and praises wherever appropriate, though the evidence so far given from *The Prophet Of Zongo Street* points to a negative representation albeit in a gentle and restrained way.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes the discussion so far made on the way Kourouma and Ali represent Islam in their works, *Allah Is Not Obligated* and *The Prophet of Zongo Street*, respectively. It summarizes the major points that have been raised and discussed. How the two writers are similar and different in their approaches to representing Islam in their works is also discussed. The section also includes my personal response to the writers' attitude to Islam and the way they have individually represented the religion. Conflicts and contradictions bordering on creed, ethics, peace and claims of submission to the will of Allah, have been exposed as Islam comes into contact with the non-religious, non-spiritual, socio-economic and political world, and even with other religions. Finally, based on the findings and conclusions arrived at, the section makes recommendation for future studies.

The 'notoriously religious' African is often caught in a web of socio-political and economic conflict that often renders his 'notoriety' and reliability as a true and loyal religious person questionable. The religious person is always in conflict with himself in the 'war' between the satisfactions of his spiritual calling and the materialistic ends. This tension often renders the African religious person confused oscillating between satisfying his spiritual and material responsibilities, and writers that take up religious issues in their works expose this tension. Concerning Islam and the secular world, the discussion has revealed different opposing positions. We have learnt that one group comprising writers with a positive attitude thinks that Islam is the best means for the survival and integration of the African, while the opposing group made up of those with a negative attitude has it that Islam is an obstruction. These two opposing positions are the major pivots on which the writers operate. Yet, as Cham observes,

there is still another group that holds the view that Islam has both positive and negative elements. And so this group of writers represents Islam both negatively and positively. To this group of writers Islam enhances the human good at some points while obstructing it at others. This group presents a balanced, humane and tolerant view of Islam in their works.

I have postulated in this thesis that both Kourouma and Ali represent Islam in a negative way. Yet their outlooks are somewhat different from each other in the way they each do the representation. I argued that Kourouma's position on Islam (indeed all the religions in his work) is absolutely negative. Ali however adopts a rather humane and gentle attitude to Islam (and indeed all the religions in his work). In spite of this, I found that there is evidence in his work to point to a more negative orientation than the positive. Therefore, this is the point at which I can argue that Ali is humane while Kourouma is radical. For, there is not a single attractive Muslim character in *Allah Is Not Obligated*. All of them fail the litmus test Kourouma puts them to in the wretched war zone setting of his work. For example, El Hajj Yacouba always denies, submerges and adulterates his Islamic calling because he thinks that keeping to it will stop him from satisfying his material needs which are his central concern. El Hajj Yacouba has shown that his responsibility to take care of the young Birahima is subordinate to meeting his own selfish material needs. We have also learnt that El Hajj Yacouba bends the Islamic doctrines themselves so as to meet his own selfish needs. Therefore though Kourouma presents him as an El Hajj, a Muslim who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca and is therefore of high status, El Hajj Yacouba's ways are totally in contradiction with Islamic doctrine and the Malinke society's expectations of him. He is corrupt, avaricious, violent, deceptive, hypocritical, and a charlatan. He is the very opposite of all the good things, the morals, his religion

represents and expects of him. Yacouba is, to coin an adjective of Mazrui's term, "Islamophobic". In fact, throughout the novel El-Hajj Yacouba's behaviour shows that he is a hater of Islam, the religion that made him become the preferred choice over Balla, as to who was to become Birahima's guardian. Having encouraged the young Birahima to carry a Kalashnikov instead of the Qur'an, Yacouba misrepresents his calling. That is to say that Yacouba fears that strict observance of the tenets of Islam will prevent him from achieving his personal good. He is a typical example of people who the Apostle Paul describes as '... without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high minded, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof' ( 2 Timothy 3: 3-5 KJV).

The young Muslim Birahima is used by Kourouma to represent the voice of the child of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Expectant of achieving a good Islamic education of peace, and a proper Malinke upbringing, he receives the very contrary – violence, addiction to drugs, receiving neither a Western nor an Islamic education. He does not observe the five pillars of Islam. Rather he observes what I will call the pillars of violence – carrying an AK-47, wearing an oversized military uniform, taking hashish; the whole of his mind charged with impious thoughts rather than the pious, elevating and socially acceptable ways his Malinke Muslim kin back in Togoballa wish he receives. Kourouma's craft in creating these conflicting goals by using Birahima is skillfully done: In running away from the dangers of Togoballa where the 'pagan' Balla is feared to infect him with his non-Islamic ways, Birahima is unfortunately worse off in the hands of his Malinke Muslim guardian who sadly encourages him to acquire the very opposite of Islamic education – war 'miseducation', and hashish 'miseducation'. And because of the hypocrisy and quackery of El Hajj Yacouba and the unfaithfulness

of all the other religious men and women, Birahima eventually ends up casting doubt on the veracity and substance not only of Islam but all the other religions.

Kourouma shows that in snatching the child away from the hands of the pagan and putting him in those of the Muslim, the worst, the contrary to the Malinke Islamic society's ideals, is what happens. This picture is a negative representation of Islam which has come as a result of the Muslim characters' inability, and perhaps even their unwillingness to pursue their Islamic calling largely because they think the religion is an impediment to their selfish desires. Thus Islam is represented negatively.

On the other hand, Ali presents the Muslim child in the *Prophet of Zongo Street* as one who is confused about the religion he has grown up to believe in. He is similar to Kourouma's Birahima who wavers in his faith. Another similarity in the two young characters is that they are both beginning to question the veracity and usefulness of Islam largely because of the bad ways of the elderly Muslim followers. The narrator in *The Prophet of Zongo Street*, though not violent, begins to doubt the substance of the Islamic religion. Yet, though to Kourouma's Birahima there is no good Muslim he can refer to, to Ali's young narrator there are a few he can name –Mallam Sile, and Uncle Hassan for example whose morals are praiseworthy and thus paint a positive image of the Islamic religion. From this observation we find that in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* there is not a single good Muslim character while there are a few in Ali's. This supports the argument that Kourouma presents a radically negative approach to Islam while Ali does both a positive and negative representation.

Also, the existence of Islam is based on the belief in the existence of Allah who, through his prophet Mohammed, founded the Islamic religion. The image of Allah presented in the works of many writers varies depending on the manner in which they

represent the religion. Where the representation of Islam is positive the image of Allah presented is positive too. An example is Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* in which Islam is positively represented. In works that represent Islam negatively there is the tendency to represent the image of Allah negatively too. We find such a case in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*, Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and Ousmane's *Ceddo* for example. These three all give a "radically negative" representation of Islam that also affects the image of Allah.

In Ali's representation of Islam, which vacillates between the negative and positive, the image of Allah is both positive and negative. In his work Allah is seen both as a dispenser of evil and good, and dispenses them to whomever whenever he pleases. The case of Shatu's suffering in 'Live In' and Rafique in 'The Manhood Test' are examples of this. Also, the image of Islam in 'Faith' is both negative and positive. At one point, the narrator, having been influenced by Mr. Johanssen's Western thoughts casts the existence of Allah into doubt. Yet at another, Allah whose existence is cast into doubt, saves the narrator, Suf-yan, for his morals and not for his religious affiliations. So that the image of Allah thus presented in the work is also both negative and positive: At one point he does not exist, and at another he exists and saves the morally upright characters.

Another way Islam is negatively represented in the two works is the relationship among the three main religions in the works –Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion. In Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* the three religions are not positively represented in any way. In the novel the characters cause all the religions to come to a confluence so that they can use them to achieve their socio-economic and political advantage. Very important representative characters on this issue are Yacouba and the warlords who combine all the three religions so as to achieve their

material needs. Here the religions are subordinated to their material needs. Kourouma therefore brings all the religions to a confluence but to conflict themselves while confronting the struggles of the war front. Perhaps the most picturesque character that cleverly combines all the three religions to meet her money-oriented purposes is Sister Hadja Gabriel Aminata. In this one character we find Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion coming to a confluence. One would have thought that such a thing is not possible in reality but in Kourouma's wretched war zone the seemingly impossible becomes possible so that religious and non-religious characters can have some measure of what they believe to be spiritual and physical protection against flying bullets, and to amass wealth. Yet, they do not achieve this purpose since the war has submerged everything save itself and the ravages thereof. Neither Islam nor any of the other religions has been able to actually offer any solution to the horrors of the war. This is a way Kourouma has decided to put the religions to the litmus test. And, from the findings so far made, none of the religions has been able to pass the litmus test. In fact, they actually contribute to worsening the situation causing the religions to fail the test of making life at the war front less difficult. That is to say that they participate in vexing the wretchedness of the realities of the non-religious bases and environment of the war.

In Ali's however the religions do not seem to come to a confluence. Here they are separated from each other though they exist peaceably together. From the manner in which Kumi advances his argument for African Traditional Religion, Ali throws the other religions into doubt especially as the young narrator vacillates between acceptance of Kumi's Traditional Religion and a rejection of his inherited religion, Islam. In fact, where Kourouma categorically condemns Islam and all the other religions Ali does not do same. He is tolerant to Islam and the other religions.

On the issues of creed and morals, Kourouma's *Allah Is not Obligated* suggests that as a result of the evils that characterize the war setting, these very important elements of Islam are all subordinated [to them]. That is to say that Islam (with all the other religions) fails to live up to expectation; the expectation being that Muslim characters who should pray five times daily, give alms and so on, do not. They are rather more concerned about capitalizing on the war to amass wealth and also to satisfy their instinct for self-preservation and meeting their selfish interests. To the characters, Islamic credo should wait till their own personal survival interests are met. For how can they have time to pray five times for example in an environment whose predominant sound is the booms of guns and rattle of rifles? Therefore Islamic stipulates are suspended to meet the survival interest of the characters.

In Ali's *The Prophet of Zongo Street* however, he does not present his characters in a way that completely suspends creed. Mallam Sile continues to observe Islamic creed, though contrary to his faithfulness, his wife casts away her marriage veil – the veil that represents her allegiance to and respect for the Islamic marriage. Also, Suf-yan has become an apostate and therefore no longer observes Islamic creed; something that his Muslim accusers think should lead him to hell. Yet, Ali's craft in making Suf-yan pass the heaven test based primarily on his moral uprightness suggests that Ali privileges morals to the mere observance of doctrines that do not seek the interest of others. Ali suggests that it is not the observance of doctrine that saves a man but how ethical man is, religious or non-religious.

On morals Kourouma has shown that indeed there is not a single admirable character in his work – not the Muslims or the other religious characters, and not even the young Muslim narrator who is expected to become a good Muslim. All the religious

characters have ceased to be moral so as to cater for their survival interests, and all the political characters have got worse in their morals so as to hold on to power. Therefore, both religious and political characters have become murderers, drunkards, drug addicts, rapists, cheats, rogues, hypocrites, and charlatans. The war environment has subordinated everybody to all of its evils.

Ali however, in the relatively peaceful environment in *The Prophet of Zongo Street*, does not subject all his characters to the ugliness of immoral acts as does Kourouma. Though there are many instances of moral turpitude among many of his characters, there are some that are attractive. Suraju's thievery and deception ; the bully and violent debtor Samadu, the quarrels, non-payments of debts, pilfering, gossip and some cases of sexual misconduct on Zongo Street are only normal in any relatively peaceful society, like the one Ali has created. And there are instances of good morals on the part of Mallam Sile, Suf-yan and Uncle Hassan for example. All these suggest that Ali presents a not too bad an image of Islam (indeed all the other religions) in his work. Therefore where Kourouma categorically subjects all his characters to moral depravity, Ali reveals some as good ones. This is another sense in which the two writers are different in their representation of Islam in their works.

The issue of theism and atheism is another that shows the way the writers represent Islam in their works. Kourouma is not so much concerned with whether or not his characters believe in Allah's existence. In fact his characters appear very religious. What he seems to be concerned with is Allah's role in their affairs. His representation shows that there exists Allah but that Allah is not obliged to be fair about the things he does here on earth. But such a view imputes injustice to Allah; that there is Allah, which is theistic but that the centre of theism (Allah) that Kourouma portrays is not a

perfect one. Allah himself, in Kourouma's horrid war front, has been placed under the nastiness so that where all the religious characters are subjected to them, Allah is himself not spared either. One absolution that Kourouma gives Allah is that he is not obliged to be fair. But, as has earlier been pointed out, if Allah is not obliged to be fair who else is or should? One would have thought that Allah should have been fair so that he can expect fairness of his followers. Kourouma shows that though there appears not to be a mention of an atheistic orientation of his characters (all his characters seem to believe in God) the Allah he shows is not a perfect one. This is because Birahima associates unfairness with him. Every character, every religion, every political group, every war faction in his work is besmirched and so is the Allah in the novel. The other absolution that Kourouma gives [the] Allah in his war zone setting is that he wields absolute power and so cannot be blamed for whatever – evil or good – that he decides to impose on his characters. But that would depict a despotic Allah who brooks no dissent or democracy to his subjects. My point is that the characters have no voice; only Allah does. If so then none of the characters can be blamed for whatever they do since they do not to have any voice in whatever happens to them. Only Allah has been shown to have a voice. But the characters are at the same time portrayed as having choices. In this case what is the place of choice in the work as Allah is the only one that decides and has absolute power? It implies that if there is no perfect Allah in Kourouma's world, then it might be equivalent to the belief in an atheistic world which does not recognize the existence of any Allah, perfect or imperfect; a world where once Allah does not exist, the concept of evil and good cannot be associated to any fixed point or deity, for example.

Ali, however, brings up the issue of theism and atheism clearly in his *The Prophet of Zongo Street*. There are Muslims who believe in the existence of Allah and thus

observe, as best as they can, the commands he gives them. Some are faithful; Mallam Sile for example, while others waver, Rafique for example. At least they all believe in God's existence. There is another group Ali presents in Suf-yan, the apostate, and Mr Johanssen, the atheist, who influences Suf-yan to become an atheist. Moreover, atheists like Suf-yan and others are saved on the Judgment Day while some of the theists are condemned. Therefore, it is not whether one is a theist or an atheist that matters, but how virtuous one is –Muslim or non-Muslim, Christian or non-Christian, African Traditionalist or African non-Traditionalist. To Ali, whether one believes in theism or atheism is not the point but whether one is ethical. And unlike Kourouma who imputes unfairness to Allah, Ali attributes some fairness to Allah not because Allah considers one a Muslim but because one is moral. While Kourouma imputes despotism and injustice to Allah, Ali credits Allah with some justice and democracy.

The attitudes of the two writers to Muslim women also create an image of Islam in the works. Kourouma's women have been found to be liars; to have contradicted themselves in their Islamic faith by contracting the services of the fetish priest, Balla, to heal Maman and to marry her. What is positive though about them is that they do not play passive roles in the turbulence of the war; they are as active as the men. But they are no less corrupted in the wretched situation of the war. To the women at Togoballa the marriage between the fetish priest, Balla, is what matters. Therefore they must 'convert' him into a Muslim to ensure this. Yet, seeing that Balla would not follow Islamic rules even though he is presumed to be one, they cannot stand his position forever and when Balla's Muslim wife, Maman, dies they send Birahima far away from him lest he corrupt his mind with his fetish priest beliefs and practices. The Muslim women characters are hypocritical in this. They are the same people who consider him as a Muslim and yet they consider him also as a pagan one and at the

same time. They are unsure what Balla really is. Or they know full well that he is a pagan but because they think he can heal Maman, for this pragmatic reason, they take advantage of him. But a position like this questions the power of Muslim characters in saving their sick member, if at the same time they need a fetish priest to do the healing. This is in contradiction to their belief that pagans like Balla are demonic. It also shows that there is no one in the religion that is capable of healing Maman, except the pagan. Kourouma seems therefore to be asking whether Islam is the best means for the integration of the individual and the society.

In Ali's the *Prophet of Zongo Street* the Muslim women also involve themselves in some negative acts: Abeebea compels her husband to use the Qur'an as a means to coerce people to pay their debt but even this fails. Abeebea, without the knowledge and consent of her peace-loving husband beats up their debtor, Samadu, for refusing to pay his debt. Also the Muslim women umpire's claim to having the expertise to determine Rafique's potency only exposes her as a charlatan. Largely the image of the Muslim women in the story is not a very good one.

The role men play in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* is certainly not a palatable one. Religious and non-religious characters all present themselves as evil. Sadder though is the case of the Muslim characters whose religion represents peace but whose behaviour reveals them as practising the very contrary to the peace claims of Islam. In Kourouma's war setting Muslim men manipulate other Muslims, Christians and traditionalists in their bid to survive the horrors of the war. All the religious characters are caught in this web. Men also manipulate their other men counterparts. The El-Hajj swindles the politicians while they also take advantage of the so-called spiritual protection he claims to offer.

In the *Prophet of Zongo Street* the men are not as overly wicked as they are in Kourouma's world. Actually, there are some good Muslim men and good non-Muslim men: Kumi, the neo-Afromadiyyan 'interpellated'; and the narrator, the conscience 'interpellated'; for example, would be considered as good men because though they uphold their non-Islamic convictions, their relation with the other characters is morally upright. Suraju and Samadu, for example, though, because of their involvement in thievery and violence, are to be considered as bad men. Ali therefore portrays in his work both negative and positive attributes of his male characters.

Also, the attitude of Kourouma's Muslim characters to wealth is a very important feature of his work. In a war zone where all decent economic activity comes to a halt, it is little wonder that indecent economic activities in the acquisition of wealth reigns in the work. Kourouma's Muslim characters, (indeed all other religious characters) subvert their spiritual calling to seek wealth. In their quest for wealth, Muslim characters care little whether their victims die or live. If their victims die, it is an occasion for them to plunder, and if they live they outsmart them to have their money. This confirms the biblical view that money is the root of all evil. And in Kourouma's war wrecked Liberia-Sierra Leone setting all the characters are affected by the wild wealth seeking contest.

Ali however does not subject all his characters to the wild wealth chase. The few that do are compelled by somewhat justified circumstances. For example, Abeebe's thrashing of the notorious boy Samadu to get her husband's money back appears more like a case of justice than evil. Yet this is not as simple as that. As a 'good' Muslim, Abeebe could still have forgiven the debt or could have been rather patient in this case. The trouble though is how long she can wait for things to go on that way.

Therefore, Abeebea is torn between being perpetually patient and using force to retrieve her husband's money. The argument continues as to what best Abeebea should have done in this case since as a Muslim she is expected to show herself as peace-loving, kind and forgiving. Abeebea's violent move to get the repayment of the debt owed to her husband is done on the blind side of her husband. Knowing that such a move will not be supported by her husband she decides to do it without his knowledge. To Abeebea, if persuasion fails force should be applied – whether or not one is religious. Other characters –for example Kumi and the narrator –are not wealth chasers; they represent modesty. Kumi does not take advantage of anybody to get filthy lucre from them. He only pushes his Afromadiyyan convictions.

Also, the position of Muslims on some socio-cultural functions shows contradictions. On the performance of funerals for example, Islamic rules direct that no Muslim is allowed to attend Balla's funeral in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* because he is not a Muslim but a pagan. Yet, in Ali's *The Prophet of Zongo Street* the imam and the other Zongo Street Muslims perform a hasty funeral for the non-Muslim pagan, Kumi. This is a clear case of conflict of purpose. The intentions of the two Muslim societies vary slightly on this stipulate. In the case of Balla in *Allah Is Not Obligated*, he is not dead yet so we do not know if the Muslims will keep to the order though the Malinke Muslim society knows that Islamic law bars them from touching the dead bodies of such paganistic people. But once they have contradicted themselves in having the pagan marry their kin, if they are confronted with Balla's death they might as well contradict themselves to bury him to prevent any discomfort. However in the case of Kumi in *The Prophet of Zongo Street* he is dead and his decomposing body is posing a threat to them. Therefore they overturn the Islamic stipulate that bars them from touching the corpses of such pagans, to prevent the potential discomfort in the stench

that awaits them. Muslim characters have thus thought about their own comfort first, not what Islam prohibits them from doing.

I began this thesis with reference to Cham's position on the usefulness of religion when it is confronted with the practical problems of hunger, poverty and the law of the state. He mentions an opposition between the spiritual and the material. Cham notes that religion is powerless in solving such practical problems. He opines that some writers undermine the power of the religious, which he connects with the secular modes of exploitation, and at the same time promotes the virtues and practice of individual and collective human behaviour. The image of Islam represented in the two works is negative though in the case of Kourouma it is a 'radically negative' one while Ali presents both a negative and less positive orientation. The settings of the two works –Kourouma's packed with turbulent action from start to finish and Ali's relatively peaceful society –have dictated the responses of Islam and the other religions to them. I therefore arrive at the conclusion that Kourouma represents Islam absolutely negatively while Ali represents it negatively but also harps some positive aspects of it. This thus makes Ali's attitude to Islam humane. The two writers add to "the growing current of thought" that points to the negative in African literature that features Islam as a sub theme. Kourouma and Ali also approach the question of whether we have a better society because of our religious affiliations in different ways –Kourouma's is a completely no answer while Ali provides both a yes and a no answer. Islam in itself, in the works, is seen not to have solutions to the countless socio-economic and political problems that confront the characters.

Finally, as we learnt earlier in this work, Kenneth Harrow observes that there is a dearth of criticism on Islam. My searches also confirm this observation. It is therefore important that we see Islam and other religions in literary criticism as very important

subjects for the contribution to scholarship. For this reason Harrow himself contributes another work to the scholarship in his 1996 publication whose concern among other things is the power and ‘presence’ of Islamic culture across the continent and its feature in African literature. In addition, he looks at gender issues and national traditions and the ‘literary oeuvres’ of some writers. Harrow again discusses Islam in his “Introduction” (2008) to Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* (2008). Also, Stephanie Newell (2006), among several other West African issues, looks at Islam and identity, and Marxism in some West African literature. However, based on my findings and conclusions there is the need to investigate more of why there is now a negative attitude not only to Islam but also towards other religions especially when it seems that the African is getting more and more religious. The many religious sects on the continent confirm that people are getting very religious. Therefore, why do some writers not portray that the religions are the best means for the ‘integration of the individual and the society’? Is the African in reality getting more religious because there are so many sects of the so many religions? Have our morals improved because we have decided to be Muslim or Christian or Traditionalist? Do we have a better society because of our religious affiliations? The answer Kourouma and Ali suggest is a no and they do so by making a parody of the Muslim and other religious characters. Kourouma and Ali imply that it is not necessarily one’s religious leanings that create a better society but how virtuous one can be; a be thy brother’s keeper, universally ethical and social interaction tenet and philosophy which reminds us of Kant’s categorical imperative which has it that whatever we do to other persons we should ask if that action should become a universal law, of a good will, of love. If not, then the action should not be encouraged, because it is distasteful. This law is not only meant for philosophers, religious people and the literati; it is a universal law.

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