

EPISTEMIC DECOLONIZATION OF AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY IN AHMADOU KOUROUMA'S *WAITING FOR THE WILD BEASTS TO VOTE*

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Abstract

Epistemic decolonization of knowledge in Africa is a clarion call that beckons at African scholars in all disciplines. The African literature, especially the novel is highly committed to this engagement. Ahmadou Kourouma's novel *Waiting for the wild Beasts to Vote* provides a springboard for analysis of African historiography. Employing an interdisciplinary methodology that combines literary criticism, historical analysis, and postcolonial theory, this article analysis how Kourouma reimagines African history by challenging Eurocentric narratives. The central problem addressed is the marginalization of African perspectives within dominant historical discourses, which have often distorted or silenced the continent's historical experiences. In addition, the major thrust of the paper is to fill in the research gap in the scholarly exploration of how African literary narratives serve as tools for reconstructing a decolonized historiography. To this effect, the study highlights the role of the griot-narrator in Kourouma's novel as a medium for reclaiming African culture, history and civilisation. In our findings, it is noted that Kourouma's work not only deconstructs colonial historical accounts but also critiques post-independence authoritarianism in Africa, offering a nuanced perspective on the continent's historical trajectory. The paper recommends a continuous systematic integration of African literary texts into historiographical studies to broaden understanding of African history. Furthermore, it advocates for the recognition of oral traditions as legitimate sources for reconstructing and interpreting African pasts, thus contributing to a more inclusive and decolonized historical discourse.

Keywords: Epistemic, decolonization, African literary narratives, historiography

Introduction

Colonial historiography in Africa has long been shaped by Eurocentric assumptions that presented the continent as ahistorical, primitive, and lacking agency. Early colonial historians often relied on written European records while dismissing African oral traditions as unreliable. This bias led to distorted representations of African societies, cultures, and political systems. However, postcolonial scholars have challenged these narratives, arguing for the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems and alternative historiographical methods that reflect African realities. Recent studies, for example, Mbembe 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Santos 2022) emphasize the need to decolonize knowledge

production by validating African epistemologies and cultural frameworks.

Within this context, epistemic decolonization emerges as a critical framework for rethinking African historiography. It seeks to dismantle colonial knowledge structures and re-center African voices, experiences, and modes of knowing. African literature plays a vital role in this process by offering alternative narratives that challenge dominant historical discourses.

Ahmadou Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* must be understood within the socio-political realities of post-independence Africa (1970s–1990s), a period marked by authoritarian regimes, political instability, and widespread disillusionment. During this era, many

African writers used literature as a tool to critique both colonial legacies and postcolonial governance. Kourouma's novel reflects this reality through satire, oral storytelling, and historical reconstruction, making it a significant text in the project of epistemic decolonization.

Objectives/Aims

This study examines how Kourouma reconfigures African historiography by integrating oral traditions and challenging Eurocentric narratives. Specifically, this study aims to:

1. analyse how Kourouma's narrative strategies challenge Eurocentric historiography.
2. examine the role of the griot-narrator as an epistemological tool.
3. explore how oral traditions function as alternative historiographical methods.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology, combining literary analysis, postcolonial theory, and historiographical critique. The primary text is analysed through close textual reading, focusing on narrative structure, language, and thematic representation. The study also engages secondary scholarly sources to situate the analysis within existing debates on African historiography and epistemic decolonization. By integrating theoretical insights from decolonial and postcolonial scholars, the research establishes a framework for interpreting Kourouma's narrative as both a literary and historiographical intervention.

Theoretical Framework

The epistemic decolonization of African historiography is a critical project aimed at dismantling colonial structures of knowledge and reasserting African perspectives in the interpretation of history and culture. This effort is guided by theoretical frameworks such as decolonial thought, African oral historiography, and postcolonial critique. Thinkers like Walter D. Mignolo, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Chinweizu offer profound insights into these frameworks, which are essential for understanding how literature and historiography intersect in the quest for epistemic liberation.

Walter D. Mignolo, a central figure in decolonial thought, argues for the delinking of knowledge systems from the colonial matrix of power. His concept of the "coloniality of power" explains how colonialism imposed Western epistemologies as universal truths, marginalizing other ways of knowing. Mignolo's focus on "border thinking" underscores the need to embrace knowledge that emerges from the lived experiences of marginalized communities (Mignolo 2009). This perspective is vital for African historiography, as it calls for the recognition of indigenous African frameworks in interpreting the past.

Literature plays a crucial role in Mignolo's vision of decoloniality. Texts that challenge Eurocentric narratives serve as tools for reclaiming African voices and histories. For instance, African writers like Chinua Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart*, employ indigenous knowledge systems and oral traditions to counter the misrepresentation of Africa in colonial literature. Through these narratives, decolonial thought provides a lens to critique and reconstruct African historiography by prioritizing local epistemologies and experiences.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's advocacy for the preservation and promotion of African languages and oral traditions aligns closely with the principles of epistemic decolonization. He critiques the dominance of colonial languages in African literature and historiography, arguing that this linguistic dominance perpetuates colonial ideologies. In his seminal work, *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ emphasizes the transformative power of African languages and oral narratives in reclaiming cultural and historical identities (Ngũgĩ 1986).

African oral historiography, deeply rooted in storytelling, proverbs, and folk songs, offers an alternative to written colonial histories. These oral traditions provide a dynamic and participatory way of recording and transmitting history. Ngũgĩ's novels, such as *The River Between*, demonstrate how oral traditions preserve collective memory and offer counter-narratives to colonial histories. By using indigenous languages and oral forms, Ngũgĩ shows that African historiography must

embrace its oral heritage to achieve epistemic decolonization.

Chinweizu's work is pivotal in the postcolonial critique of African historiography. His book, *The West and the Rest of Us*, interrogates the cultural and historical distortions imposed by colonialism. Chinweizu critiques the internalization of colonial ideologies by African elites, which he sees as a barrier to true decolonization (Chinweizu 1975). His insistence on a return to African-centered perspectives resonates with efforts to decolonize African historiography through literature.

Postcolonial critique, as advanced by thinkers like Chinweizu, examines the ways colonial narratives have shaped African identities and histories. Literature becomes a powerful medium for exposing these distortions and recovering authentic African voices. For example, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* critiques colonial interference in African cultural practices, presenting a nuanced understanding of African history and philosophy. By reclaiming African perspectives, postcolonial critique contributes to the broader project of epistemic decolonization.

The interplay between theory and literature underscores the importance of creative works in decolonizing African historiography. African Writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, and Ama Ata Aidoo use their works to challenge colonial narratives and foreground African epistemologies. These literary texts act as repositories of indigenous knowledge, preserving oral traditions and cultural practices that colonialism sought to erase.

Literature Review

Epistemic decolonization is an increasingly significant area of inquiry in postcolonial studies, seeking to dismantle Eurocentric systems of knowledge that have marginalized or erased non-Western ways of knowing. Foundational works such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) emphasize the reclamation of indigenous languages and cultural forms as essential to resisting colonial domination. Ngũgĩ argues that the imposition of

colonial languages and epistemologies served as a tool of cultural alienation, eroding the historical consciousness of colonized peoples. Boaventura de Sousa Santo's *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (2014) similarly critiques the epistemic violence perpetuated by Western knowledge systems and advocates for the recovery of suppressed or marginalized epistemologies. Together, these works provide a theoretical foundation for understanding epistemic decolonization as a broader intellectual project, which is particularly relevant to African historiography and literature.

In postcolonial historiography, scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty and Achille Mbembe have interrogated the limitations of Eurocentric historical frameworks. Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000) critiques the universalization of European historical narratives, advocating for a pluralization of historical voices that includes indigenous perspectives. Similarly, Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001) explores the ways in which colonial legacies continue to shape African societies and highlights the need for new methodologies to reconstruct Africa's past from within its cultural and epistemological frameworks. These works emphasize the inadequacy of colonial historiography in representing African experiences, calling for alternative forms of historical production that privilege African perspectives.

African literary studies have significantly contributed to the discourse on decolonization, particularly through the exploration of oral traditions and cultural memory. Abiola Irele's *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (2001) examines how African writers draw on oral traditions, mythology, and collective memory to construct narratives that resist colonial representations. Irele underscores the centrality of literature as a medium for reclaiming historical agency and articulating a distinctly African worldview. Similarly, Ato Quayson's *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice, or Process?* (2000) explores how African literary texts engage with postcolonial theory to critique colonial power structures and articulate new

modes of historical understanding. These studies highlight the importance of literature in the project of epistemic decolonization, offering insights into how writers like Ahmadou Kourouma challenge colonial historiography.

The role of oral traditions in African historiography has been the subject of extensive scholarly attention. Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition as History* (1985) remains a seminal work that legitimizes oral traditions as valid sources of historical knowledge. Vansina argues that oral traditions, when critically analyzed, provide invaluable insights into the social, political, and cultural histories of African societies. Paul Lovejoy's *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (1983) similarly demonstrates the use of oral accounts in reconstructing African perspectives on historical events, particularly the history of slavery. However, these works primarily focus on oral traditions as standalone historical sources, leaving room for further exploration of how oral traditions are adapted and integrated into literary narratives as tools for historiographical critique.

Critics have also examined the intersection of oral traditions and literature, particularly in the context of African storytelling. Isidore Okpewho's *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity* (1992) explores how African writers draw on oral storytelling techniques to create new literary forms that retain the cultural and historical significance of traditional narratives. Okpewho's analysis emphasizes the role of oral traditions as repositories of communal memory and historical consciousness, providing a critical framework for understanding the narrative strategies employed in Ahmadou Kourouma's *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*. Similarly, Chinua Achebe's essays in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975) advocate for the role of African literature in reclaiming cultural identity and resisting the epistemic dominance of colonial narratives. These works underscore the potential of literature to function as a site of historiographical innovation, bridging the gap between oral traditions and historical documentation.

Suffice to add that in summary, scholars

have approached African historiography from different perspectives. Jan Vansina emphasizes the validity of oral traditions as historical sources, arguing that they provide reliable insights when critically analyzed. In contrast, literary scholars such as Abiola Irele focus on how African literature transforms oral traditions into narrative forms that preserve cultural memory. While Vansina prioritizes historical reconstruction, Irele highlights literary creativity, revealing a gap between historiographical and literary approaches. Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o advocates linguistic and cultural decolonization, while Mbembe critiques the persistence of colonial power structures in postcolonial Africa. These perspectives collectively stress the need for epistemic transformation but differ in their methodological focus. This study differs from other studies by examining how literary texts, specifically Kourouma's novel, function simultaneously as historiographical critique and reconstruction. It bridges the gap between historiography and literary analysis by demonstrating how narrative strategies serve as tools of epistemic decolonization.

Analysis and Findings

Ahmadou Kourouma's *Waiting for the wild Beasts to Vote* provides a representation of African history, politics, and culture through the oral tradition technique of griot storytelling. It also serves as satire to reclaim and reshape African historical narratives. Through its structure and content, Kourouma subverts Eurocentric historiography, presenting an alternative account that foregrounds African voices and experiences. First is the oral tradition. The oral traditions are seen to be central to Kourouma's narrative, serving as a tool to reconnect with African historical methods. As we know very well, in the precolonial African societies, history was preserved and transmitted through oral storytelling, songs, and performances, often delivered by griots who were considered as the custodians of communal memory. Kourouma mirrors this practice in his novel by adopting the voice of a griot, Bingo, who narrates the story of the fictional African leader, Koyaga. Right from the prologue of the novel, Bingo, the narrator

introduces himself as well as his duties:

I am Bingo, the Sora; I sing, I pay tributes and pluck the cora. Asora is a teller of tales, one who relates the stories of the hunters to spur their heroes to greater feats. Remember the name of Bingo, I am the griots, the poet and the chronicler, the musician of this Brotherhood of hunters (Kourouma, 2)

Kourouma's use of the griot-narrator reflects Mignolo's concept of border thinking, where marginalized knowledge systems challenge dominant epistemologies. By foregrounding oral storytelling, the novel repositions African oral tradition as a legitimate historiographical method. Moreover, by incorporating oral tradition, the storytelling in the novel becomes richer and more engaging, as it weaves together various phases of African history in the narrative.

For example, the narrator Bingo embodies communal memory, aligning with Vansina's argument that oral traditions preserve historical consciousness. However, unlike Vansina's empirical approach, Kourouma transforms oral tradition into a literary strategy, thereby expanding its function beyond documentation to critique. Furthermore, the novel delves into Africa's ancient, beginning with the 'paleonigritic,' who are depicted in a sarcastic tone, reflecting the derogatory manner in which European conquerors often described them:

... the Europeans came face to face with something unfamiliar, something of which the treaties of the Africanists, which were the explorers' Bible, made no mention. They came upon the 'naked people.' A people who lived completely naked. They had no social system. No chief. Each clan lived in a walled village and the chieftain's power extended no further than an arrow's flight. . . The ethnologists named them the 'naked people.' (4)

The above quotation captures a significant aspect of African oral history, particularly the European interpretations and misrepresentations of African societies encountered during the colonial and pre-

colonial periods. It is laden with biases that demonstrate how oral history and external narratives intersect, often distorting the realities of African cultures to fit Eurocentric perspectives.

Intertwined with the use of oral tradition is the deployment of proverbs in the novel. Ahmadou Kourouma uses proverbs as a powerful strategy for epistemic decolonization, showcasing the richness of African oral traditions and indigenous knowledge systems. Generally, proverbs serve as vehicles for transmitting wisdom, and moral values, countering colonial narratives that dismissed African epistemologies as inferior. Through the griot narrator, Bingo, Kourouma integrates proverbs seamlessly into the storytelling, anchoring the narrative in African thought and expression. For example, the griot's use of the proverb *A bird that has never left its tree cannot know that elsewhere there is millet*" (28) to highlight the limitations of staying confined to familiar surroundings or perspectives. Just as the bird remains unaware of the abundance of millet beyond its tree, individuals who remain confined to their immediate environment may miss out on broader experiences or opportunities.

He also uses the proverb *In a battle between a swarm of flies and a herd of elephants, it is not always the larger who comes of best* (30) to challenge the assumption that size or power alone determines success and emphasizes the importance of collective effort, persistence, and adaptability. The proverb also highlights that even small or seemingly insignificant forces, like a swarm of flies, can challenge and overwhelm larger, more powerful entities, such as elephants, when they act collectively.

Besides the oral tradition, epistemic decolonisation shift to the revalorisation of the social structures of Africa which most often misunderstood by the western civilisation. The description of 'naked people' living without a social system or central authority reflects a Eurocentric misunderstanding of African communal structures and governance. In the ancient African, societies were often organized around kinship, clan systems, and decentralized governance that did not conform to Western hierarchical models. The lack of a central "chief"

as expected by Europeans does not imply an absence of leadership. Instead, leadership in such communities was distributed among elders, spiritual leaders, or councils, whose authority was deeply embedded in cultural practices.

The novel draws on precolonial African political traditions—such as the hunter societies ‘donso,’ initiation rituals, and secret societies to explain leadership and governance. ‘Donso’ leadership structure is described as follow:

At the head of each community of hunter is a donso-kuntigi, a chief guardian of the laws and principles of the brotherhood. He rules together a college of senior hunters who have ceased to hunt. The master hunters, or simply the masters, have hunters assigned to them, hunters known as donso-denw whom they continue to instruct in the techniques of hunting ...
(364)

These institutions were complex and sophisticated systems of law, morality, and social organization long before colonialism. Kourouma’s inclusion of these systems refutes colonial narratives that depicted African societies as chaotic or stateless. In addition, the social order of the Naked People, even though disparaged by the Whiteman, is depicted as quite elaborate, with rules and taboos that govern their daily lives. The transgression of such rules and taboos was sanctioned by well-defined punishments. For example, Tchao, the father of Koyaga—the central character of the novel was severely sentenced to death by Allah or the spirits of the ancestors for transgressing the rule forbidding wearing of clothes by the Naked People. The narrator reveals: *This offence against nakedness, the oldest and most respected tradition of the Paleos could not go unpunished by Allah or by the manes of the ancestors. Tchao would pay dearly for his crime; pay for it by death in excruciating agony* (9).

Another intriguing contribution of Kourouma’s novel to epistemic engagement is the incorporation of the African traditional medical solutions to human health edified by the knowledge of traditional medicine of Nadjuma, the

mother of Koyaga, the protagonist. She has been the one treating her husband, Tchao, in traditional medicine as he is seeing languishing in the prison of the colonial masters with wounds he sustained as result of struggling with the chains he was tied with. The narrator depicts her knowledge of traditional medicine as he says the *She was wise in the ways of boiling roots, of healing potions, of cvasting powerful spells and weaving alliances* (13).

Nadjuma embodies indigenous knowledge system of human health delivery. Her expertise in mystical or traditional healing and spell-casting goes a long way to challenge colonial narratives that dismissed African wisdom as primitive or inferior. Her skills represent the validity of traditional African epistemologies, highlighting the interconnectedness of medicine and spirituality in African societies. Her depiction also underscores the importance of preserving and respecting African cultural and intellectual heritage in postcolonial narratives. Suffice to add that the novel provides an assault on Western system of democratic ideals on African societies, showing how they are manipulated to serve the interests of local elites. For example, the vivid description of the corrupt nature of Koyaga’s regime, as well as that of other dictators in the novel illustrate how democracy, as defined by Western norms, often fails to account for the cultural and historical realities of African governance. The dictatorial African leaders who emerged in the postcolonial era through treacherous electoral process are portrayed as corrupt, self-serving, and disconnected from the people they govern. Kourouma exposes how these leaders replicated colonial systems of exploitation under the guise of independence.

The portrayal of dictatorships reclaims African agency in narrating the continent’s political struggles. Rather than focusing on external factors alone, the novel holds African leaders accountable for their failures. This internal critique is an essential aspect of decolonization, as it dismantles the colonial narrative of Africa as a passive victim of history and instead presents an account of African agency, responsibility, and resistance. By presenting this critique, Kourouma

decolonizes the historiographical framework that evaluates African political systems solely through Eurocentric lenses that usually address African problems from the perspective of ‘how Europe underdeveloped Africa.’

Discussions

The findings show that Kourouma’s novel operates as a counter-historiography that destabilizes Eurocentric narratives. By integrating oral tradition, satire, and allegory, the text redefines historical authority and legitimizes African epistemologies. *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* serves as a text that challenges colonial historiographical frameworks about Africa and contributes significantly to debates on decolonial knowledge production. The novel’s structure, rooted in the African oral tradition through the griot-narrator Bingo, emphasizes the legitimacy and richness of indigenous African epistemologies. By centring the narrative on African perspectives and critiquing both colonial and postcolonial systems, Kourouma opens up new pathways for rethinking African historiography in the 21st century.

A key contribution of the novel lies in its reclamation of oral traditions as legitimate forms of historical documentation. Unlike traditional historiography, which privileges written records, Kourouma’s narrative emphasizes performance, memory, and communal knowledge. This aligns with decolonial theories that advocate plural knowledge systems. The novel also critiques the failures of post-independence African leadership, demonstrating how dictators perpetuated colonial systems of exploitation. Koyaga’s regime, portrayed as a corrupt dictatorship disguised as democracy, reflects the betrayal of the promises of independence. This critique redefines African

historiography by holding African leaders accountable for their role in shaping the continent’s political struggles, thereby rejecting the narrative of Africa as merely a victim of external forces. This positions the novel within contemporary debates on governance and historical accountability.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* serves as a tool for epistemic decolonization by redefining African historiography through oral tradition and literary innovation. The novel challenges both colonial distortions and postcolonial failures, offering a more inclusive understanding of African history. Kourouma’s work underscores the broader role of literature in epistemic decolonization by offering alternative frameworks for understanding African history. The novel employs several literary strategies to deconstruct Eurocentric notions of governance and development. For example, the griot’s satirical depiction of European explorers labeling African societies as “naked people” challenges the reductive stereotypes perpetuated by colonial narratives. Such critiques provide a foundation for rethinking African history from within its cultural and epistemological contexts.

Thus, *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* repositions African literature as a critical tool in reshaping global knowledge systems. By integrating oral traditions, critiquing colonial legacies, and addressing postcolonial failures, Kourouma’s novel offers a new perspective on Africa’s historical trajectory. It argues for a historiography that is inclusive of indigenous voices, cultural practices, and providing a framework for reconstructing African history in ways that honour its complexity and resilience.

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