

Comparative Literature and the Quest for Global Literary Theory: Exploring a West African Margin

Ewa A. Łukaszyk

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Portugal

ewa.a.lukaszyk@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-9969-0459

ABSTRACT:

This article reflects on the intellectual aspirations and current challenges faced by the discipline of Comparative Literature. The challenge identified comes from the global margins and the necessity of integrating the plurality of non-colonial legacies in the syncretic vision of global literary studies. The case study presented in the article, the literature of Guinea-Bissau, is considered not in the usual inter-literary context of Lusophone universe, but in its regional, West African cultural history, rich in tribal legacies and Islamic influences. The regional focus permits to emphasize the plurality of local languages, legacies of oral literature associated with them, as well as non-European literacy. The focus proposed permits us to see the literature of Guinea-Bissau not as an emergent phenomenon, but as a conclusion of long-lasting cultural processes reaching, with the postcolonial writing, their stage of exhaustion rather than auroral moments.

RESUMO:

Este artigo reflecte sobre o destino intelectual e os desafios que a disciplina da Literatura Comparada enfrenta na actualidade. O desafio identificado advém das regiões marginalizadas do mundo e da necessidade de integrar a pluralidade de legados não-coloniais na visão sincrética dos estudos literários globais. O estudo de caso apresentado no artigo, a literatura da Guiné-Bissau, é considerado não no contexto interliterário habitual do universo lusófono, mas na sua história cultural regional, a da África Ocidental rica em legados tribais e influência islâmica. Este enfoque regional permite delinear a pluralidade das línguas locais, os legados da literatura oral a elas associada, bem como a tradição da escrita não-europeia. O enfoque proposto permite também ver a literatura da Guiné-Bissau não como um fenómeno emergente, mas como a conclusão de um processo cultural duradouro que atinge, na escrita pós-colonial, a sua fase de exaustão e não um momento inicial.

KEYWORDS:

literature of Guinea-Bissau; non-colonial legacies; oral literature; emergent literacy; translatability

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

literatura da Guiné-Bissau; legados não-coloniais; literatura oral; escrita emergente; tradutibilidade

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Introduction

FOR MANY DECADES of its history as a discipline, Comparative Literature has been living on expanding its geography. The initial challenge, as David Damrosch recalled in *What Is World Literature?*, was formulated by Goethe, arguably in crucial interaction with Johann Peter Eckermann, a visitor to the old poet's residence in January 1827. Eckermann also informs us about the conversations that Goethe had with Jean-Jacques Ampère, who in his lifetime was a promising author of essays on Comparative Literature and later on, already after Goethe's death, would publish an original approach to literature through travel. Ampère's highly idiosyncratic book *La Grèce, Rome et Dante* (1848), written during a trip to the East and proposing to read classical works through the lens of the landscape that had inspired them, epitomises, in an almost literal sense, the move out of Europe, the will of crossing geographic borders that constitutes the deepest root of Comparative Literature as an intellectual project. Goethe dreamed of *Weltliteratur* as a combined divan (i.e. a poetic anthology) of East and West. And indeed, from the end of the eighteenth century on, a new discipline, Oriental studies, eagerly explored great literatures that were put almost on an equal footing with classical Greek and Roman literature. Not only the emergent comparative study of the world's literatures but also Romanticism as a wider cultural movement was born from the reinvention of philology, which switched from Greek and Latin to Romance and Germanic studies, Arabic and Persian literature. As the colonial era progressed, further Middle Eastern and Indian legacies became the new frontier. Such texts as the Vedas began to be studied, and libraries of clay tablets containing not only the well-known story of the flood but also of Gilgamesh's descent into hell were discovered and deciphered – those remote origins of Comparative Literature were still vital and highly exciting for Damrosch in the first years of the new millennium (2003).

This is why, although Eurocentrism appears as a sort of original sin of Comparative Literature, and the discipline would be bitterly criticized for it, it may equally be argued that its essential project had always consisted of struggling against its own Eurocentricity. Toward the middle of the twentieth century, leading comparatists such as George Steiner pushed the boundaries of discourse and expertise focused on Western Europe to include new literary geographies, be them for instance Russian literature in his famous book *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* (1959). The influential postcolonial school gained its momentum from the same initial aspiration of enlarging horizons. The global turn of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, apparently triggered by the vehement criticism of the Eurocentric understanding of Comparative Literature in Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003), may rather be seen as the discipline's fulfilment. However, a new lease of criticism may be formulated. Formed in the postcolonial school, Comparative Literature opened its new, global chapter, investing in the creation of an adjacent field, World Literature studies. Nonetheless, the very concept of the "world" has been criticized by Pheng Cheah (2016) as yet another capitalist and colonial construct. The focus on "ultramajor" literatures, fostered by such scholars as Bergur Rønne Moberg and David Damrosch (2022), is still referred to this normalized con-

cept of the “world” in which the questions of scale, circulation, and the ultraminor writers’ reliance on translation (or their resistance to it) remain relevant.

Comparative Literature diverging from its Eurocentric inscription and contributing to the vaster horizon of World Literature studies has a lot to do to refine its specific methodologies – such as forms of genre theory that might better reflect the diversity of literature around the world – that have lagged behind the general reflection in literary studies throughout the postcolonial era. The awareness of these shortcomings fosters new approaches growing out of the specific, specialised fields; their findings require integration in the complex domain of Comparative Literature. The work on non-European genres that occupy prominent positions in variously defined supranational and regional literary perspectives is at the cutting edge of the discipline. An illustration of this is Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych’s reflection on qasida and its performative definition as “a ‘ritual’ of allegiance, a bond of mutual recognition and obligation” legitimizing a patron’s rule (2022, 13) rather than a given pattern of lyrical composition with its defining set of formal constraints. Her book is an example of how the specific contribution of an Arabist working on the formal experimentation put into practice by the eleventh-century Syrian poet al-Ma‘arrī opens a passageway into a wider, comparative appreciation that remains to be done. Departing from its local beginnings in Arab literature, qasida became one of the most widespread literary genres of the Afro-Eurasian Old World, yet its development remained almost entirely in the margin of the colonial-postcolonial process of the formation of World Literature. This pre-Islamic genre crossed countries and centuries to resonate in the Fulani poetry of the eighteenth or nineteenth century, contributing to the West African literary conundrum that I propose to revisit in this essay.

Two decades ago, Gayatri Spivak could only formulate a general interrogation about the existence of such West African peoples as the Fulani and their place – if any – in “major” literatures created elsewhere. She does mention the West African peoples in *The Death of a Discipline* (2003, 16-18); the topic comes to the fore as she comments on Maryse Condé’s *Heremakhonon*, where a West African subaltern gives a list of identities that a French-speaking upper class woman from Guadeloupe knows not: Mandingo, Fulani, Toucouleur, Serer, Woloff, Toma, Guerze, Fang, Fon, Bété, Ewe, Dagbani, Yoruba, Mina, Ibo. The characters in Condé’s novel cannot come to any conclusions; one of them does not understand what the other means. Neither do the majority of Spivak’s American readers. Apparently, West African peoples must be represented because they are unable to speak for themselves. Or we lack interest, patience, and specialised skills to digest the specificity of their poetry.

There is a whole universe of literature that stems from non-colonial cultural histories. It speaks minor languages, follows genre constraints and the rules of literariness that seem unattractive to the dominant global public. No wonder that, for its obscurity, difficulty, and lack of apparent appeal, it remains marginal in the current academic practice outside the narrow groups of specialists. Yet this invisible part of humanity’s literature, like the underwater part of an iceberg, is also the source of a powerful temptation. This is what motivates me to muse on the dimen-

sions of literariness in West Africa and try to situate them in a Portuguese-related context, that of Guinea-Bissau.

This article explores the point of intersection between the quest for a constantly enlarged understanding of literary phenomena, initially formulated in the context of the dominant, essentially West European culture, and the challenge coming from global margins with their wider-than-colonial legacies. As a case study, I will focus on the literature of a small country in West Africa, Guinea-Bissau. It is usually treated as part of the postcolonial Lusophone world, isolated, by an accident of colonial history, from the predominantly French- and English-speaking regional context. The choice of this tiny country is paradoxical, because – among its multiple social, economic, and political problems – it could also be seen as a literary backwater (even if referred to its presumed postcolonial interliterary area, that of Lusophone literatures) since the literature of other, equally tiny countries, be it Cape Verde or São Tomé, seems richer and more attractive. For a long time, this corner of the Lusophone world was considered a “country without a literature”, “an empty space”, according to the formulation of Manuel Ferreira (1975, 319), as it occupied only a marginal place in early manuals and anthologies of Lusophone literary history¹.

Coming late to the decolonial literary school centred in its Lisbon headquarter at the Casa dos Estudantes do Império [House of the Students from the Empire], Guinea-Bissau participated only in a diminutive degree in the poetic flourishing of the final decades of the Portuguese colonial empire. Later on, it remained in the margin of the boom of postcolonial novel that introduced such former Portuguese colonies as Angola and Mozambique into the limelight of global literary visibility. The first postcolonial Guinean novels appeared in the late 1990s and never formed a consistent line of literary production. The internal fissure of Guinean literature, hesitating between Portuguese as a literary language and the quest for an idiosyncratic Creole (Kriol) expression, contributed to the positioning of the country in the margin of World Literature. As a working hypothesis, I would claim that this appearance of marginality and scarcity is a refraction of the predominance of non-European genres in the country’s poetic expression. Accentuating linguistic plurality, I will make patent why I prefer to use cautious expressions, such as “Portuguese-related” or “(post-)Lusophone”, rather than the admitted scholarly designations such as “Lusophone literature” in the description of the literary expression in Guinea-Bissau. On the other hand, the Guinean example will serve me to exemplify the range of problems related to non-European legacies and their correct apprehension in global literary studies.

Paradoxically, it is due to its multidimensional marginality that Guinea-Bissau may be treated as a testing field of literary theories for a Comparative Literature that nurtures the aspiration of reflecting the full extent of global diversity. I dare say that global definitions of literature must be formulated precisely in such

¹ Even in recent years, the place of the literature of Guinea-Bissau in the general landscape of Lusophone writing has been marginal. As an example, one may cite its scarce presence in the anthology *Literatura-Mundo Comparada, Perspectivas em Português – Mundos em Português*, edited by Helena Carvalhão Buescu and Inocência Mata (2018).

places, representative of the complexity of non-Eurocentric world. In many ways, Guinea-Bissau embodies the ultimate periphery, in stark contrast to any definition of a global centre. Throughout the colonial era, this small territory was a Portuguese enclave embedded on the side of a giant entity called French West Africa. Yet also in the indigenous world, it was a “last frontier”: the westernmost and northernmost part of the territories occupied by the Mandingo (Mandinka) and the Fulani. Throughout a complex history that included equal parts European colonization and non-colonial processes such as inter-ethnic conflicts and holy wars, this rugged, difficult-to-control coast was a Zomia – an anarchic refuge for displaced individuals and groups. Guinea-Bissau may be seen as a synecdoche of the contorted world of tiny tribes, former jihadists, and the descendants of refugees settled at the end of the world. Being such a complex cultural reality, Guinea-Bissau allows for a deeper insight into what literature may be, into its most idiosyncratic forms. In a radical way, the exploration of the West African margin offers an adventure into the farthest frontiers of literariness that permits to relive the thrill of the scholars delving into the distant past and excavating the Sumerian clay libraries, so persuasively narrated by David Damrosch in *What Is World Literature?* (2003).

1. The quest for sufficiently ample definition of literariness

Broadly, Western literatures share a relatively coherent system of genres issued from the classical, Aristotelian definition. This system of distinctions into the lyrical, the epic, and the dramatic remained for over two millennia the basis of the European, then Western perception of literature. Comparative Literature as a meta-domain of reflection on the post-classic literature is rooted in this relative clarity in defining its object of studies. However, the exploration of the global margins requires constant extension and reshaping of those Eurocentric definitions.

Certainly, Comparative Literature strives for new paradigms, but it is also haunted by a sense of old-fashioned continuity, looking back to the heroic era of colonial scholars who for the first time noticed the existence of non-European literature. The same instinct of intellectual nostalgia makes me look back to structuralist literary studies which formulated some seminal questions about the nature of literary phenomena. Nowadays, this essential structuralist interrogation on literariness, considered as outdated by the postmodern schools of reading, may be seen under a new light, helping to address the multitude of sources. In a global world, one must constantly remember the rule of multiplicity, the fundamental mode of coexistence of everything with everything. The comfort of moving within a single, be it post-classic, post-structural or post-modern literary theory – which could be naively accepted as a universal mono-theory – is no more.

Arguably, Comparative Literature has already accepted the awareness of the multiple, culture-specific theories of literature of non-European origin or “world literary knowledges” according to the designation proposed by Revathi Krishnaswamy (2010, 408). If we moved to North Africa around the tenth century AD, we could participate, already at such an early date, in a number of lively theoretical and literary debates concerning the question what literature truly is: whether it

is more of a *ṣan* – a craft that can be learned, or whether the decisive factor is *ṭab* – the innate talent. Echoes of such a debate have been carried throughout history by the traditional Muslim system of knowledge transmission. They were present in the mental universe of West African Sufi brotherhoods looking for a theory befitting their attempts at mystical poetry. Apparently, when we come to Guinea-Bissau, such concepts as *ṭab* and *ṣan* are expected to appear sooner than the classic essay by T.S. Eliot. Yet both sources may appear, because *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919) was once a standard reading assigned to students at Portuguese universities, and therefore a number of Guineans may be well acquainted with it. Throughout the early postcolonial decades, Portugal took up the mission of forming the elites of the new independent countries², financing scholarships, also in the domain of literary studies. Be that as it may, this example illustrates a general truth: what defines the specificity of the global era and its literature is the merging and interaction of concepts, patterns, and inspirations. *Ṣan*, *ṭab*, and T.S. Eliot may often be part of the horizon of literary awareness of an individual formed both by non-colonial legacies and postcolonial opportunities.

The eclecticism of received legacies seems to be the challenge of our times. Therefore, nothing is old-fashioned or archaic in global literary studies – not only because theoretical fashion is supposed to be questioned as a Eurocentric category but also because the basic determinant is the long duration. The depth of time perspectives that global literary theory must integrate contrasts with the shallow chronology of postcolonial approaches in which pre-colonial cultural roots were often treated as something entirely obliterated by symbolic violence and therefore absent. Postcolonial literary awareness operated on scales reduced to decades, generations, at best one or two centuries of colonial history; it failed to take into account broader, longer-lasting traditions marginalized by the colonial supremacies. The current challenge is to foster the awareness of multiple non-Western concepts of literature and merge it with the legacy of Eurocentric literary theory.

An aspect of literature, often overlooked by structuralists, is emphasized by T.S. Eliot (1972): literature is characterized by transmission and duration; it may be seen as the capitalization of symbolic value – a concept I refer to as its patrimonial nature. Literature serves as a repository of symbolic value, encompassing what humanity deems worth preserving across time. This transmission occurs in various ways. Literary works may be conveyed through writing or non-literate, technical media such as radio. An improvised poem can be memorized and performed repeatedly or become a mobile phone video shared on a streaming platform. Even in resource-limited contexts like contemporary Guinea-Bissau, where editing houses, libraries – often even pencils and school notebooks – are scarce, the patrimonial essence of literature persists, demonstrating its adaptability and endurance.

The structuralist legacy frames literature as a message distinguished by its form, with multiple layers of meaning. It has a metalinguistic dimension, creatively engaging with the rules of language, and a metatextual dimension, interacting with the genetic and textual conventions rooted in tradition. Furthermore, litera-

² This collaboration was established by an agreement signed by Portugal and Guinea-Bissau on 11th July, 1975 (Acordo Geral de Cooperação e Amizade).

ture often exhibits a metacultural dimension, enabling a critical interplay of entire traditions and cultural identities coexisting – just like in my shorthand “*šan*’, *tab*’ and T.S. Eliot” – in an individual and collective awareness. Thus, a literary message functions as both a metatext – a “theory about other messages” – and a meta-tradition – a “theory about tradition(s)”. These mechanisms remain active even in societies that lack an abstract, generic concept of “literature”. At its core, literary awareness stems from an intuition about a message’s significance, sparking a desire to remember it, pass it on, and connect it to a broader tradition.

Also, the performative definition of literature, which emphasizes that it is created with purpose by someone, offers valuable insight. Literature functions as a social ritual, carried out by “agents” who meet specific criteria for their role. In Mandingo communities, well explored by colonial ethnologists, griots form a strictly defined, trans-generational group where the literary role is inherited from father to son. However, the category of literary “agents” can be much broader. Guinean *cantigas di ditu*, playful poetic compositions, are spontaneously improvised by women in daily interactions (Augel 2007). Yet even here, the category of “agents” is clearly defined: women, not men, perform these pieces. This delineation of form and function reserved for a specific category of people helps establish the boundary between literature and non-literature. Literary messages operate within a social framework where their purpose and audience are understood. In the life of a *tabanka*, a traditional Guinean village, such an occasion is a *djumbai* – a communal gathering –, creates an expected setting for literary expression distinct from everyday conversation (Queiroz 2011, 149-153). Within such contexts, shared cultural competencies enable the group to recognize and value literary messages, fostering specific expectations and preferences that distinguish them from other forms of communication.

During a Guinean *djumbai*, the texts will be performed over and over again, we will hear stories passed down from generation to generation, but there will be an element of fake or genuine surprise as a reaction to the form of a riddle, codified but open to innovation. In other words, literature is repetition and predictability combined with innovation. It encompasses the horizon of audience’s expectations and the element of surprise. In all this, the element of agon, i.e. the struggle for primacy and the will to show off the individual’s ability to capitalize on pre-existing literary material, remains constantly present. This echoes T.S. Eliot’s concept of the balance between individual talent and connection to tradition. Literature, being associated with what is deemed valuable and significant, elevates the skilled individual within his or her social context, celebrating their ability to innovate while remaining rooted in tradition.

What deserves to be stressed is the fact that literature holds social value regardless of a community’s stage of material development. While it may seem like a luxury for the wealthy and privileged, literature is, in fact, deeply embedded in human societies worldwide. Alongside this ubiquity is a shared tendency to make value judgments, leading to enduring debates about what constitutes “better” or “real” literature versus what is considered an unworthy imitation.

2. Divergent oralities and literacies

The Eurocentric view associates the term “literature” with writing. The term “orature” is a secondary derivation associated, often abusively, with Africa. This perspective overlooks the continent’s long history of diverse writing systems, such as the Libyco-Berber abjad from the first millennium BC, as well as Arabic, Ge’ez, and others. In West Africa, literacy has a dual history: colonial and non-colonial. Literacy existed in the region before European contact, though Islamicate writing developed significantly during what might also be considered the colonial era. The eighteenth century, in particular, was a pivotal period of spiritual revival, exemplified by the rise of Sufi brotherhoods such as the Tijaniyya, the most distinctive tariqa of West Africa (Wright 2020).

Literature in Guinea-Bissau reflects the complex interplay of historical processes and conditions. While the country, as a former Portuguese colony, is often automatically classified as part of the Lusophone world, it is important to note that in 1975, following Portugal’s withdrawal, only a small percentage of the population – around 10% – had any proficiency in Portuguese (Guterres et al. 1986). By the late 1990s, when political agreements formalized the PALOP group (African countries that recognize Portuguese as their official language), Lusophony in Guinea-Bissau remained more aspirational than real. Paradoxically, Portuguese language proficiency has steadily grown among the Guinean population over the postcolonial decades. Yet simultaneously, Kriol has experienced even more rapid development, expanding from use by about half the population in the early postcolonial period to over 90% in the first decade of the new millennium (Instituto Nacional de Estatística de Guiné-Bissau 2009, 36). Be that as it may, behind the fiction of Lusophony still lies what the colonial explorer Landerset Simões once called “the black tower of Babel” (1935). Although the country has less than two million inhabitants, there are about 30 ethnic groups and virtually each of them has its own tongue, mainly from the Niger-Congo language family. Guinea-Bissau has a weak Muslim majority: about 47% of the inhabitants profess Islam, about 30% – the so-called animism, i.e. various native African cults, and less than 20% – Christianity. The Islamized Fula and Mandingo communities coexist with the predominantly animist Balanta group, while Christianity is relatively widespread among the Pepels, who had the closest contact with the Portuguese during the colonial period. The rest of the mosaic consists of small, often endangered ethnic and linguistic groups: Mandjacos, Bijagós, Soninques, Nalu, etc. It is worth stressing, however, that these ethnic groups do not fit within the postcolonial borders of the country but are part of wider regional reality of West Africa. An ethnic group such as the Fula inhabits the entire Sahel belt stretching latitudinally to the gates of Sudan and encompassing a total population that exceeds 20 million (Kahera 2011).

The great historical reservoir of Islam in West Africa is Mali and the inner Niger Delta; it forms also the main reservoir of literacy encompassing the written tradition in Arabic and African languages written in Arabic script, with large intellectual centres and libraries of Timbuktu and Djenne. On the other hand, the world of griots extends further south, connecting with the cultural traditions of countries

such as Ivory Coast. As already mentioned, during the colonial period the then so-called Portuguese Guinea was a tiny enclave at the gate of the gigantic entity that was the colonial A.O.F., or French West Africa. This is from where some decolonial impulses and inspirations flowed in the 1950s and 1960s, and hence, for example, in the 1960s, some theatrical attempts in French, as well as a marginal tradition of Francophone poetry episodically appeared under the influence of the development of Francophone West African literature. This is the result of transcolonial exchange, i.e., mutual inspirations between cultures dominated by different colonial empires operating in the same region.

It is thus justified to argue that a plurality of parallel literary histories went on in Guinea-Bissau. Many of them were rooted in areas more or less distant from the country's present-day borders. One of the hypotheses is to treat the ethnic diversity of Guinea-Bissau as the result of mechanisms resumed under the term "Zomia", proposed by the Dutch historian Willem van Schendel (2002). The emergence of amorphous, anarchic social structures might have been the result of a long-term process of pushing subsequent ethnic groups to swamps and islands near the coast under the pressure of stronger, more aggressive organisms forming in the interior of the continent, such as the Kaabunké state (Lopes 1997). These migrations of weaker ethnic groups lasted until the nineteenth century.

The Portuguese exploited the pressures exerted by aggressive inland groups during their expansion into Guinea. Their first contact came in the fifteenth century during explorations of the African coast and the search for a route to India. However, it was only later that they established slave emporia like Cacheu and Ziguinchor. In the early seventeenth century, they settled on the island of Bolama, which became their operational centre. Yet the Portuguese were not the first colonizers. It is more accurate to talk about the multiplicity of parallel histories and, consequently, the multiplicity of lines of tradition and sets of cultural competences transmitted through them. Before the Portuguese, the Mandingo from the Mali Empire initiated the first wave of Islamization between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries (although it should be remembered that Islamization is a gradual, multi-stage process continuing to this day). The second wave was brought by the Fula. Only the third wave, largely coinciding with the expansion of the Fula, were the Portuguese – this is how we can outline a history of the conquerors, the sequence of waves of expansion. Equally important is the history of the conquered – the populations subjugated or displaced by these expansions. The mosaic of ethnic groups includes communities that resisted assimilation into dominant identities linked to expanding monotheistic religions, Christianity or Islam, and preserved unique cultural traditions outside these monotheistic frameworks.

In the realm of literature, Guinea-Bissau exhibits an ever-expanding complexity, much like a fractal. Intersecting influences continuously complicate the landscape, with more and more branches diverging in various directions. Similar to a mathematical fractal, the scales vary: some branches grow finer over time, while others gain power, only to be overlaid with finer details at their edges. In this way, Guinea-Bissau can be seen as a microcosm of small, proliferating literatures, each expanding and evolving in its own unique direction. An overview of this complex dynamics requires a degree of simplification to identify different layers of tradition.

The first one, as it was already mentioned, is the world of the Mandingo griots, i.e., a category of performers known in Guinea-Bissau as *djidius* (griot is a French name given by colonial ethnologists). In this universe, we encounter the figure of an adjutant poet, inextricably linked with a specific leader. This bard is the embodiment of memory and its guarantor: with his person, with his face, he vouches for the reliability of the message. The biological continuity of the griot line from father to son is a guarantee of the continuity of history. Hence, griots written down in the twentieth century claimed to be direct, biological descendants of figures from a past as distant as the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. Interestingly, all this happens in an Islamicate context, in which writing, associated with religious scriptures, is not unknown. But *djidius* believe that the embodied oral tradition they represent is something better, more reliable than the written text. For them, written knowledge is dead. The books are silent and do not guarantee the truth brought by their personified testimony, their personal act of bearing witness.³

The Fula are more closely linked with writing, particularly through their historical chronicles, which were occasionally studied during the colonial period (Moreira 1948). These chronicles, referred to as *alfarrábios* by the Portuguese, were often written with locally made ink on marabou paper – a type of paper produced in Africa using traditional Muslim recipes –, in Arabic or in Fula using Arabic script. They narrate the history of individual groups, schools, and genealogies of scholars. Fulani literature is also rich in religious poetry and mystical writings, which are especially prominent in regions where Sufism and Sufi brotherhoods have a strong presence. Mystical Islam stands as a significant source of literary tradition, entirely distinct from any European pattern.

Adding another paragraph in this short description requires further simplification. An artificial category of “animists” can be used as an *ad hoc* sketch to group tribal cultures and identities pushed to the margins by the spread of monotheistic religions. This category mainly includes forms of creativity and communication rooted in orality. Even in absence of any abstract concept of genre, literature’s key feature – codified constraints – can still be identified. For instance, proverbs, riddles, and narratives explaining observed phenomena all fit within a broad definition of literariness. In the twenty-first century, we can speak of both orature and literature, as many oral texts have been transcribed and even reproduced in print. The first to do so was the Portuguese priest Marcelino Marques Barros (1900). In the postcolonial period, further collections and publications appeared (e.g. Gomes and Cavacas 1997). This tradition not only persists but also branches out fractally. The written oral tradition begins to evolve, producing new texts that are both re-oralized – read from books and retold – and serve as inspiration for fresh writing based on oral heritage.

It is worth emphasizing once again the key phenomenon of two-way interaction between orality and writing, already mentioned in the case of griots who knew

³ This aspect can be persuasively illustrated by an opinion contrasting the value of embodied witnessing and mere bookish writing, voiced in the margin of the French transcript of the Mandingo epic of Sundjata: “Quelle piètre connaissance que la connaissance qui est figée dans les livres muets” [What poor knowledge is the knowledge that is frozen in silent books] (Niane 1960, 78-79).

writing but valued oral testimony more highly. Written oral tradition and oralized written literature are far more common than the solitary, silent reading of texts, which is the basic form of literary engagement in Western tradition. In Guinea-Bissau, poetry sketched on a piece of paper may rather be brought to a *djumbai* or read on local radio. It is important to note that a large portion of the population is still illiterate – while three-quarters of men can write, in many regions roughly half of women remain illiterate⁴. Additionally, financial limitations prevent the widespread purchase of books. This is why, in Guinea-Bissau, the radio becomes a vital medium for transmitting and preserving literature. Also, this is where we might uncover some of the missing elements of the multilingual landscape, such as poetry written in Balanta. While literature in this language has not been printed, it is known that Felix Sigá wrote manuscripts containing Balanta poems along with texts in Portuguese and French. These poems were reportedly read on local radio (Bessa 2011, 170-171). This example highlights the challenges of researching Guinean literature.

Relativising the importance of the country's Lusophony, it is important to notice that the development of Kriol in Guinea-Bissau is deeply tied to the decolonial process and the country's quest for a national identity. During the struggle for independence and the formation of the postcolonial state, Kriol was envisioned as a supra-tribal language that could serve as a unifying force, positioned as an alternative to Portuguese. It was intended to represent *Guinendadi* – the Guinean identity – distinct from the existing ethnic identities, transcending them and fostering a sense of national unity. The evolution of Kriol literature thus reflects the broader dynamics of postcolonial nation-building, where language plays a pivotal role in asserting new cultural and political identities. The best-known examples of poetry in Kriol include the works associated with the group "Meninos da Hora de Pidjiguiti" and the poetry sung by the group "Cobiana Djazz". However, the international visibility of the latter may be attributed to a single researcher, the Brazilian scholar Moema Parente Augel, who paid due attention to its transformative importance, published it and analysed it (1997). Most likely, "Cobiana Djazz" case should be treated as an illustration of a broader category of omitted or lost phenomena: in the chaos of colonial wars and the material difficulties of the first postcolonial decades, texts and recordings produced by other artists did not survive.

On the other hand, the "Meninos da Hora de Pidjiguiti" poetic collective is deeply tied to the decolonial struggle in Guinea-Bissau, particularly the massacre of dockworkers at Pidjiguiti wharf in 1959, which marked the beginning of the unrest that utterly led to a full-scale colonial war. This event became a foundational moment for the group, which adopted Kriol as a literary language to express their decolonial aspirations. This shift to Kriol included the creation of written and printed poetry, as exemplified by Odete Semedo's volume *Entre o ser e o amar* (1996). A key feature of this literary movement is the phenomenon of diglossia,

⁴ According to the 2022 data included in *The Global Economy*, the literacy rate in Guinea-Bissau is as low as 53.90%. In younger generations (age group 15-24), the male literacy rate is 75.28%, while the female rate is 62.55%. In older age groups this gender disparity is likely to be greater.
https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/guinea-bissau/Literacy_rate/ (accessed: 17/12/2024).

where Kriol and Portuguese exist in a constant state of interaction, with texts often self-translated between the two languages by their authors. This reflects the tension between the colonial language and the indigenous, decolonial speech, highlighting a cultural and linguistic negotiation essential to postcolonial identity. The desire to establish a literary tradition around Kriol was not only a linguistic move but a political one – intended to crystallize the emerging identity of the young nation and state. This intention is most evident in works like the decolonial anthology *Manténhas para quem luta!* (Regalla et al. 1977), whose title – marked by an exclamation point – evokes the revolutionary, ideologically charged spirit of the time. The anthology exemplifies how literature served as a tool for nation-building, attempting to forge a collective identity and a sense of solidarity in the postcolonial context through the power of poetry. Also, the theatre in Kriol has an important tradition due to the activity of Carlos Vaz and his Teatro Popular Guineense. However, novels in Kriol seem to be absent, at least in print form, though it is possible that a manuscript may yet emerge, awaiting the right local publishing initiative.

3. Finding a book for the global reader

In Guinea-Bissau, poetry comes to the fore, overshadowing the novel, which remains secondary in importance. However, in the broader context of World Literature, the novel holds a central and highly visible place. Within the postcolonial framework of Lusophony, the arrival of a Guinean novel was eagerly anticipated, as it represented a possibility for a text that could be read, translated, and marketed beyond the borders of Guinea-Bissau. This expectation of the novel aligns with the criteria of global literature as outlined by David Damrosch, who argues that for a text to be part of World Literature, it must enter global circulation and become part of a functional network of texts. This global circulation allows literature to transcend its local origins and engage with distant, diverse contexts: only then it may serve as “a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time” (Damrosch 2003, 281). In the case of Guinea-Bissau, the emergence of the novel as a major literary genre was not merely about the creation of new stories but also about connecting the nation to a global literary discourse. Through the novel, the country’s literary voice might be heard internationally.

Historically, the emergence of the novel in Guinea-Bissau can be traced back to colonial times. Its early precursor was Fausto Duarte, a writer born in Cape Verde who worked as a colonial administrator in Portuguese Guinea. Duarte’s literary aspirations were shaped by a desire to follow in the footsteps of figures like René Maran, a dark-skinned writer from Martinique who served as an official in the structures of French Equatorial Africa. Duarte’s biography (Bull 1985) offers a poignant illustration of the contradictions inherent in Salazar’s colonial regime. As a *branco da terra* (a term referring to Creole-born individuals), Duarte occupied a complex, ambivalent position within the colonial hierarchy. Officially considered “white” by the empire, he was still distanced from the full privileges associated with race, and his identity was in tension between the roles of colonizer and colonized. This liminal status may have made literary work seem like a path to elevate

his social and cultural standing, and through his engagement with metropolitan literary traditions, he may have hoped to achieve a higher status – reflecting the phenomenon of colonial mimicry. Duarte's attempt to craft a literary career within this system not only highlights the cultural contradictions of colonialism but also the ways in which literature was used by colonized individuals to navigate and sometimes challenge the colonial structures that oppressed them.

Fausto Duarte's work as a colonial administrator, coupled with his frequent field trips throughout Guinea, provided him with a deep understanding of the ethnic complexity of the region. This knowledge informed his literary work, which drew heavily on the traditions of Portuguese naturalism and regionalism. His novel *Auá* (i. e. *Eve* in Fula), which depicted the intricate social and cultural fabric of Guinea, won the first prize in the colonial literature competition held in Lisbon in 1934. This recognition was a significant achievement within the Portuguese context, akin to the success of René Maran's *Batouala*, which won the Goncourt Prize in France in 1921.

Despite Fausto Duarte's alignment with the colonial system, *Auá* subtly conveys an African perspective. The novel's protagonist, Malam, is not depicted as a typical colonial subaltern but rather as an independent and resourceful young Fula man capable of making his own decisions. His tragedy does not stem from being a victim of colonial rule, but rather from intra-African conflicts and personal choices. Malam's troubles begin when he offers hospitality to a wandering marabout, a Muslim missionary from the north. The marabout takes advantage of Malam's generosity, raping his wife Auá, who becomes pregnant with a child whose lighter skin betrays the marabout's crime. Although such affairs were usually tolerated in the Fulani community, Malam's response is shaped by his exposure to Portuguese cultural norms, particularly the concept of male honour. This foreign influence compels him to seek revenge, a stark contrast to traditional Fulani approaches. He decides to kill the perpetrator of the rape. It is worth mentioning that the issue of honour crimes was widely discussed in the nineteenth-century Portuguese naturalistic literature, such as the novels by Camilo Castelo Branco, who may have had some influence on Duarte's plot choices. Be that as it may, Malam's friend and former rival accuses him of having learned jealousy over a woman from the Portuguese. It is to him that Malam hands over Auá and the child fathered by the marabout. With a pained soul, he sets off north to Dakar, perhaps to complete the Fulani model of education in the circle of Sufism.

The beginnings of colonial literature in Guinea-Bissau were modest, and the novelistic tradition remained largely dormant for many decades, with a gap until the late 1990s, when notable works like Abdulai Silá's *Mistida* trilogy and Filinto de Barros's *Kikia Matcho* emerged. Despite these contributions, poetry has remained the core of Guinean literature, maintaining its central role in the cultural landscape. This focus on poetry, a form of expression that does not penetrate easily into the mainstream of global circulation, contributed to the misconception concerning Guinea-Bissau as a literary "empty space". Such an opinion is widespread among scholars and editors looking for literary works that would fit into the broader framework of World Literature, circulating in translation and engaging with global literary criticism. For a long time, Guinea-Bissau seemed indeed to be such a

void in the realm of Lusophone African literature, especially when compared to other Portuguese-speaking African countries like Angola and Mozambique. These nations produced bestselling authors such as José Eduardo Agualusa, Mia Couto, and Ondjaki, whose works were translated into multiple languages and enjoyed recognition on the global literary scene. Guinea-Bissau's literary output apparently lacked a similar presence in the global literary market.

In reality, however, Guinea-Bissau, like many emerging literary cultures, seeks to leverage World Literature as a means of gaining visibility and influence on the global stage. The global literary market provides an avenue for writers from countries with less-established literary traditions to overcome the constraints they face within their local contexts, such as limited publishing infrastructure, low literacy rates, and economic challenges. By entering this broader literary network, they can reach wider audiences and secure a place within the evolving literary dialogue. Many Guinean writers aim to tap into this circulation. Abdulai Silá's success with *A Última Tragedia* (part of the *Mistida* trilogy) exemplifies the path to international recognition for Guinean writers. His novel, which was published in French just one year after its original edition, made a significant impact despite the book being released by a relatively obscure publisher. This achievement was further reinforced by its translations into English (2017) and German (2021), making Silá one of the few Guinean writers to successfully navigate the complexities of the global literary market. Silá's success underscores a crucial strategy for emerging literatures seeking global recognition: the balance between local concerns and universal themes. By weaving together distinctly local issues – such as the political and cultural struggles of Guinea-Bissau – with broader, more universal literary elements, Silá crafted a narrative that resonates with both local and international audiences.

Abdulai Silá's *As Orações de Mansata* is a prime example of how local issues and global intertextuality can be successfully interwoven to create a piece of literature that resonates on multiple levels. The play draws from the rich tradition of decolonial Guinean theatre, rooted in the larger movement of transcolonial theatre across West Africa. This tradition often explores the political and social struggles, and Silá's work is no exception, as it touches upon the Guinean tragedy of power and corruption. On the other hand, it puts this local problem in the framework of intertextuality that is legible to a global audience, namely, it refers to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, providing an opportunity for an inspiring analysis of multiple triads: instead of three witches there are three wives, three seers, but also three *talibés* – female scholars from the circle of Muslim knowledge –, and three *katan-deras* – “witches” responsible for ritual offerings in the Pepel culture. The fact that *As Orações de Mansata* occupies a prominent place in international scholarship – perhaps even more so than the rest of Guinea-Bissau's literary output – speaks to the power of Silá's method. By combining local political and cultural issues with universal literary themes and structures, Silá creates a work that transcends its immediate context.

A much more local in its intention – but in a sense also quite Shakespearean – Guinean novel, *Kikia Matcho*, by Filinto de Barros (1997), did not gain similar recognition. The owl in the title, which is – quite importantly – a male and not a

female of its species, embodies, according to animistic beliefs, the returning spirit of the deceased. The plot starts with a funeral and mourning, presenting, at the same time, the inability to let go of what has inevitably grown old and died. The novel's subtitle, *o desalento do combatente* ("the exhaustion of the combatant"), captures a deep sense of disillusionment that permeates the postcolonial experience in Guinea-Bissau. Central to this theme is an exploration of masculinity (*machundadi*) embedded in the patriarchal structure of Guinean society. During the decolonial struggle, men had a clear purpose: to fight the Portuguese, a struggle that gave their lives direction and meaning. However, in the aftermath of decolonization, the existence of the former heroes lost its obvious meaning. The only glimmer of hope in the dilapidated country is emigration to Portugal, where those who were once considered traitors – like the ex-commando Djaló – are now being rewarded, receiving Portuguese military pensions. The idea of victory, once so clearly defined, now feels hollow and meaningless. Also, the search for alternatives proves to be fruitless, as illustrated by the case of Baifaz. His crash-course in engineering, made in the Soviet Union, did not provide him with sound skills, and therefore the transformative power to change his personal circumstances or contribute meaningfully to the country's development. This failure to adapt to modernity drives him back to older, animistic beliefs, which in the narrative are presented negatively. These beliefs, centred around destructive magic and envy of other people's prosperity or success, are seen as a retreat into a past that offers no solutions to the pressing challenges. Filinto de Barros' rather gloomy novel can be interpreted as a sign of overcoming not only colonialism, but also the postcolonial system of references. *Kikia Matcho* depicts the state of mental postcoloniality, derived not only from the oppression suffered but also from the vicissitudes of the fight against the colonizer, which shaped the characters of the "combatants". These individuals, once driven by the clear and noble goal of fighting for independence, now find themselves adrift.

It is no accident that this transcolonial quest for a way out of the dysfunctional mentality takes on a gendered form. At the heart of this struggle is the male identity, which is portrayed as being particularly fractured and lost in the aftermath of the independence struggle. The women in *Kikia Matcho*, though also living in a harsh, postcolonial reality, seem to find ways to adapt. Their resilience, born of necessity, allows them to carve out a place for themselves in the world – often by shouldering the burdens of survival and raising families on their own. Men, on the other hand, particularly the former combatants, are shown to be increasingly marginalized and disempowered. They lack the tools to navigate the new reality, unable to find meaningful roles in society. Their victory in the decolonial struggle now seems meaningless, leaving them in a state of frustration and hopelessness. This male crisis of identity is at the heart of *Kikia Matcho*. The Guinean man yearns for a mobilizing project – an "Afrotopia," a vision of a better future for the continent that could reinvigorate their sense of purpose. But such a vision is elusive, and the novel emphasizes the non-obviousness of transcolonial solutions. Instead, it describes a state of suspension, a limbo in which these men find themselves stuck, unable to move forward. This unresolved tension echoes the broader impasse of the end of the historical cycle: colonial, decolonial, and postcolonial realities seem to entrap individuals in a never-ending loop of dissatisfaction and struggle. The spirit

of the dead returns, embodied in a male owl, as if an African version of Minerva's owl that flies out at dusk, yet brings not the ancestral wisdom from the afterlife but a reminder of the lost potential and unfulfilled promises of the past.

Conclusion

Tiny, poor, politically unstable, and largely excluded from global commercial flows (except for drug smuggling), Guinea-Bissau seems to occupy the margins of all margins, a periphery of peripheries. Yet, in my exploration of the new frontiers of Comparative Literature, Guinea-Bissau stands out as a privileged location – not in spite of, but precisely because of these very characteristics. It serves as an important literary laboratory where the less visible aspects of global literature are brought to light: multilingualism beneath dominant postcolonial languages, and the interweaving of traditions, often present as deeply transformed, barely legible, but highly valued and carefully transmitted echoes of various timelines.

The two-way dynamic of tradition-building is evident in Guinea-Bissau, where traditions constantly merge and differentiate in a fractal pattern. In these divergent forms, literature is a continuous testimony to crisis, doubt, ambiguity, and the absence of definitive solutions. This specific nihilism is neither a postmodern legacy nor the result of colonial violence, but a raw, original expression of humanity's fundamental aporia – the uncertainty of human fate and the human tragedy of not knowing what to do with life. As Domínguez, Saussy, and Villanueva note, “if literature is a use of language that testifies to humans' creativity, its creation is intimately linked to the aim of overcoming our mortality” (2015: xviii). In the unrestrained bricolage of language in literature, the curse of our undetermined freedom – humanity's ability to do anything with its life, yet its essential inability to truly do anything to solve the problem of death – is mirrored and exposed. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the first Guinean novels, often seen in postcolonial terms as foundational texts, actually appear as conclusions, points of arrival. Rather than pioneering, they are reflective of the twilight of postcoloniality, while simultaneously affirming the vitality of the non-colonial pasts that continue to resonate through literature.

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Ewa A. Łukaszyk is a transnational scholar specializing in global literary studies. A former professor of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and the University of Warsaw, she is currently (2024-2025) a Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation scholar in Lisbon. A prolific academic author, she has contributed over 200 works to the field of World Literature. In the area of Lusophone studies, she has published seven monographs in Polish, including *Empire and Nostalgia: The 'Late Style' in Portuguese Culture* (2015) and *The Pessoa Nebula: A History of Portuguese Literature from the Romantic Period to the Present* (2019).

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