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LITERATURE, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND CULTURE IN NOVEL KAÏDARA BY AMADOU HAMPÂTÉ BÂ'S

Sastra, Lingkungan, Dan Budaya Dalam Novel *Kaïdara* Karya *Amadou Hampâté Bâ*

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the relationship between literature, the environment, and culture in Amadou Hampâté Bâ's novel Kaïdara by exploring how the author utilizes elements of Mali's natural environment - such as the desert, savanna, animals, plants, and water - to construct a cultural and spiritual vision that reflects the identity of Malian society. This study employs a descriptive-analytical method, utilizing concepts from ecocriticism and cultural anthropology to analyze the novel's text. The results indicate that the environment is not merely a setting for events but serves as a fundamental element in shaping characters, values, customs, and the beliefs of the community. This novel also plays a role in preserving cultural memory through the integration of oral traditions with environmental symbols. Furthermore, this study affirms that the relationship between humans and nature in the novel is built on a foundation of respect and balance, making this work an important representation of African environmental literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, literary studies have undergone significant changes in the types of scholarly questions posed regarding literary works and their functions. Researchers' focus is no

longer limited to the analysis of linguistic or aesthetic aspects, nor to the examination of narrative techniques and stylistic characteristics alone. Instead, modern literary research has begun to focus on the relationship between literature and various universal human issues, such as the environment, culture, identity, collective memory, sustainable development, and the diversity of civilizations.

This shift in orientation stems from the realization that literary works are never created in a vacuum, but rather emerge within specific historical, social, cultural, and environmental contexts. These contexts leave a tangible imprint on the development of characters, plotlines, symbols, and the ideological perspectives conveyed by literary texts. Therefore, literature is viewed as a cultural discourse that reflects human relationships with the natural world and society, while also playing a role in shaping and reproducing those relationships through language, imagination, and symbols.

In line with these developments, various approaches to contemporary literary criticism have emerged that transcend the boundaries of traditional literary criticism. One of the most prominent approaches is ecocriticism, which has developed since the 1990s as a field of study that examines representations of the environment and nature in literary works and analyzes how literary texts shape human perspectives on the natural world, along with the ethical and cultural relationships that connect it to humanity.

This approach shifts the role of the environment from merely a setting to an active element that generates meaning. Nature is no longer understood solely as a geographical space where events take place, but rather as a cultural and philosophical structure that influences the characters, narrative structure, and intellectual vision of a literary work (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Buell, 1995).

Ecocritical thinkers argue that today's environmental crisis is not merely a matter of the natural sciences, but is also closely tied to the way humans construct cultural conceptions of nature. Therefore, literary texts do not merely describe forests, deserts, rivers, or wildlife, but also convey ethical and symbolic values that shape the relationship between humans and their environment. Thus, literary analysis from an ecocritical perspective does not stop at identifying natural elements but seeks to reveal how the environment becomes a medium for conveying meaning that reflects society's view of the world and humanity's place within it (Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2012).

In subsequent developments, the scope of ecocriticism expanded to include the literature of non-Western societies. While in its early stages the focus was primarily on European and

American literature, recent research has shown that every culture develops distinct conceptions of nature. Therefore, understanding the relationship between humans and the environment requires attention to the cultural characteristics of each society.

It is in this context that African literature has garnered increasing attention for offering a unique perspective on nature as an integral part of a society's cultural and spiritual fabric—not merely an economic resource or a geographical space.

The uniqueness of Kaïdara's novel lies not only in its narrative themes but also in the cosmological perspective that forms the foundation of the work. This novel is rooted in an African tradition of thought that views humanity, nature, and the spiritual world as an inseparable existential unity. Consequently, the environment in the novel is not understood as a static geographical space, but rather as a cultural system that preserves collective memory, embodies moral values, and reproduces knowledge through symbols, myths, and stories. This intertwining of natural and cultural elements transforms every aspect of the environment into semiotic signs that demand an interpretation that goes beyond superficial descriptions to the underlying structure of thought within the text.

From this perspective, ecocriticism gains significant relevance in the study of this novel because it does not view nature merely as a literary object, but rather as an element that contributes to the creation of meaning. The emergence of ecocriticism has prompted a reexamination of various concepts in traditional literary criticism that limit the study of literature solely to language, style, or artistic structure. The pioneers of this approach have called for an expansion of the scope of analysis to include the reciprocal relationship between literary texts and the environment, just as the social sciences examine the relationship between humans and their natural and cultural environments (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996).

According to Lawrence Buell, a literary work can be considered ecological literature if nature is not treated merely as a setting for the story, but rather as a presence that influences the formation of the text's intellectual vision and determines humanity's position in the natural world (Buell, 1995). Buell also emphasizes that environmental literature does not advocate for nature through direct preaching or propaganda, but rather reshapes readers' awareness of the relationship between humans and the environment through narrative structure, symbols, and literary imagery.

Meanwhile, Greg Garrard argues that ecocriticism not only examines representations of natural landscapes but also analyzes various cultural discourses regarding deserts, forests, the wilderness, water, animals, pollution, and consumption—as well as how these elements become symbols that reveal a society's view of itself and the world (Garrard, 2012). From this perspective,

the desert in Kaïdara is no longer merely a geographical space but a symbol of the search for truth. Water becomes a symbol of the renewal of life, while various living creatures serve as vehicles for conveying wisdom and knowledge. Thus, the environment in the novel functions as a structure of thought and culture before it is a natural element.

This view is consistent with traditional African philosophy, which is based on the principle of the interconnectedness of all beings. In many African societies, there is no clear boundary between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. All three are viewed as components of a single cosmic order built on the foundation of balance and harmony. Consequently, sacred trees, rivers, mountains, and animals are often associated with religious rituals and social beliefs that grant them a status far exceeding their material value. It is this perspective that is clearly reflected in both the oral literary tradition and modern African novels.

It is at this point that ecocriticism intersects with cultural anthropology, which views culture as an integrated system of symbols and meanings created by humans to understand the world and organize their lives within it. Clifford Geertz explains that culture is not merely a collection of customs or traditions, but rather a web of meanings woven by humans themselves—a space where people live and simultaneously give meaning to their existence (Geertz, 1973). This understanding requires reading literary works as cultural texts that reveal a society's system of thought and elucidate human relationships with the environment, power, religion, and collective memory.

From this perspective, Kaïdara's novel can be viewed as both a cultural document and a work of literature. The novel revives traditional patterns of thought, social rituals, spiritual beliefs, proverbs, and symbolic stories, then reworks them into a modern narrative structure. The novel does not merely present these elements but also assigns them an epistemological function. Each environmental symbol serves as a key to understanding an aspect of Malian culture, while the characters' journeys become a journey into the depths of their society's cultural consciousness.

In this context, cultural anthropology plays a vital role because it can explain the hidden meanings behind these symbols. Many images that seem foreign to outside readers actually derive their true meaning from the cultural system in which the symbol originated. For example, animals in Fulani culture do not merely serve a narrative function but symbolize wisdom, courage, patience, or knowledge. Water symbolizes purification and renewal, while the desert serves as a symbol of spiritual trials and the process of gaining life experience. Therefore, understanding these meanings requires a combination of literary and anthropological interpretations.

This interconnection between the environment and culture demonstrates that Kaïdara's novel does not present nature as a standalone entity, but rather as an integral part of the formation of humanity itself. The environment gives rise to culture, while culture in turn interprets the environment and preserves it through value systems, customs, and rituals. Thus, a reciprocal relationship is created that makes it impossible to examine one without considering the other. It is this that lends the novel its richness of meaning, setting Kaïdara apart from many other works of African literature.

Although Amadou Hampâté Bâ occupies a very important position in the canon of African literature and thought, a review of various scholarly publications shows that most previous research has focused primarily on his contributions to the preservation of oral traditions, or has examined his works from the perspectives of folklore, Sufism, symbolism, or narratology. In contrast, the interaction between environment and culture in the novel Kaïdara has not yet received adequate attention, particularly through an approach that integrates ecocriticism and cultural anthropology within a single analytical framework. Furthermore, a number of studies still view the environment merely as a setting in which events take place, without uncovering its symbolic, philosophical, and intellectual functions in shaping the worldview presented in the novel.

Based on these facts, there appears to be a research gap stemming from the lack of a comprehensive study explaining how the environment becomes a generator of culture in literary texts, how culture in turn reproduces ecological consciousness, and to what extent this novel presents a distinctively African environmental philosophy that differs from the Western paradigm underlying the emergence of ecocriticism. This gap is all the more significant given that Malian literature has yet to receive adequate attention in Arabic-language scholarship, even though its works possess immense symbolic and cultural richness. Therefore, a re-examination of Malian literature through contemporary critical approaches is expected to make a meaningful scholarly contribution to the development of African literary studies.

STATE OF THE ART, RESEARCH GAP, AND NOVELTY

Recent African ecocriticism has moved beyond treating nature as a passive setting and increasingly foregrounds nonhuman agency, Indigenous ecological knowledge, decolonial environmental thought, oralities, and culturally specific ecological epistemologies. Current scholarship emphasizes that African environmental literature cannot be adequately read through a narrowly Western nature/culture binary because ecological meaning is often generated through relations among land, animals, ancestors, oral knowledge, ritual, and community (Egya, 2026; Ngongkum, 2026; Lavoix, 2026; Masamaka, 2026; H. Eze, 2026; A. Eze, 2026). Studies of

African oral traditions likewise show that folktales, proverbs, and storytelling practices function not merely as repositories of heritage but as active mechanisms for transmitting environmental knowledge and sustaining cultural memory (Abubakari, 2025; Ohia, 2025; Abubakara & Jonah, 2026).

These developments are especially relevant to *Kaïdara*, whose narrative world is structured through desert, water, plants, animals, initiation, symbolic journeys, and oral knowledge. However, existing discussions of Amadou Hampâté Bâ have predominantly emphasized oral tradition, folklore, spirituality, symbolism, and the preservation of African cultural heritage. What remains insufficiently developed is an integrated explanation of how environmental elements in *Kaïdara* simultaneously operate as ecological agents, cultural signs, epistemological devices, and repositories of collective memory. This gap is important because recent African ecocriticism explicitly calls for readings that bridge Anglophone and Francophone traditions, decoloniality, Indigenous studies, and oral forms of ecological knowledge (Egya, 2026).

The novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing *Kaïdara* as an eco-cultural knowledge system rather than merely an environmentally rich narrative. By integrating ecocriticism with cultural anthropology, the study explains the reciprocal process through which nature generates cultural meaning and culture, in turn, regulates ethical relations with nature. The desert, water, animals, and plants are therefore read not only as symbols but as epistemic agents within an initiatory ecology. This formulation contributes to African ecocriticism by demonstrating how a Malian/West African oral-derived narrative articulates ecological knowledge, spiritual ethics, and cultural memory as a single relational system.

Based on these theoretical and epistemological considerations, this study seeks to develop a critical interpretation that goes beyond a straightforward description of natural elements. This study seeks to uncover how the environment in *Kaïdara* transforms into a cultural and philosophical structure, as well as how the environment contributes to shaping the novel's perspectives on humanity, identity, and knowledge. Thus, the following section will outline the research questions, objectives, and significance of this study as a foundation before delving into the discussion of methodology and analysis.

What sets *Kaïdara* apart from many other African narrative works is that it does not view the environment as a material entity separate from humans, nor culture as a static collection of customs and traditions. Instead, the novel constructs a philosophical vision that regards nature, culture, and humanity as a single system of knowledge in which all elements continuously influence one another. The characters' journey is not merely a geographical journey across the desert, but a spiritual and intellectual journey toward self-discovery and an understanding of the

universe. Each stage of the journey becomes a moral test, while every element of the environment serves as a cultural symbol and philosophical emblem that opens up new spaces for interpretation.

Therefore, reading a novel from the perspectives of ecocriticism and cultural anthropology is not intended merely to catalog natural elements or describe cultural phenomena, but rather aims to uncover the underlying structure of thought that governs the relationship between the two within the narrative discourse.

The significance of this approach becomes even clearer when we consider that most research on African literature to date has focused primarily on colonialism, identity, resistance, political conflict, race, and various other postcolonial issues. Although these themes are extremely important, the dominance of such studies has, in many cases, led to the relative neglect of the environment and culture as the foundation of African social consciousness. Yet long before the environment was viewed as an object of colonial exploitation or an issue of ecological destruction, nature in the African imagination had already been a source of wisdom, a center of moral values, and a space for the formation of collective memory. This reality is particularly evident in the oral traditions that served as Amadou Hampâté Bâ's primary source of inspiration in constructing the symbolic world of his novel. The significance of this approach becomes even clearer when one considers that the majority of research on African literature to date has focused primarily on colonialism, identity, resistance, political conflict, race, and various other postcolonial issues. Although these themes are extremely important, the dominance of such studies has, in many cases, led to the relative neglect of the environment and culture as the foundation of African social consciousness. Yet long before the environment was viewed as an object of colonial exploitation or an issue of ecological destruction, nature in the African imagination had already.

The uniqueness of Malian society also adds an additional dimension to this research. Mali is one of the cultural centers of West Africa that has successfully maintained the continuity of oral traditions for centuries. These traditions serve not only as a form of entertainment or a repository of history, but also as a knowledge system that governs human relationships with the land, water, animals, and plants, while guiding interactions among individuals, communities, and both the visible and invisible worlds. Consequently, many environmental symbols in Kaïdara can only be understood within the cultural context from which they originated. Their symbolic value stems not merely from their natural characteristics, but also from cultural meanings passed down through generations.

On that basis, this study does not separate the environment from culture or culture from the environment. Rather, this study is based on the assumption that the two continuously shape one another. The environment provides resources, symbols, imagination, and mythology for society, while culture imbues the environment with moral, spiritual, and social meaning and simultaneously determines how humans interact with it. This interaction gives rise to a worldview that transcends a utilitarian perspective on nature and affirms that humans are not the absolute rulers of the environment, but rather part of a cosmic system built on the principles of balance, respect, and shared responsibility. Such a view aligns with many ideas developed in contemporary ecocriticism, although it is rooted in a distinct African cultural tradition.

From this perspective, this study is based on a series of scientific questions that are integrated into the entire analytical process - not as a list of standalone questions, but as a central axis guiding the course of the research. This study seeks to explain how Amadou Hampâté Bâ utilizes elements of the natural environment in constructing the narrative world of the novel *Kaïdara*, to uncover the symbolic and cultural meanings embedded in the desert, water, plants, and animals, and to analyze the role of these elements in shaping the characters' worldviews. Furthermore, this study seeks to explain how the environment interacts with oral traditions, mythology, and local wisdom to produce a literary discourse that represents the distinctiveness of Mali's cultural identity. Furthermore, this study aims to examine the extent to which the novel successfully presents a philosophical conception of the relationship between humans and nature, and whether this conception is a continuation of traditional ecological perspectives in African culture or, conversely, offers a new formulation in line with developments in modern thought and literature.

Based on this framework, the primary objective of this study is to develop a critical reading capable of revealing the ecological and cultural structures in the novel *Kaïdara*, accompanied by an analysis of the narrative and intellectual functions performed by natural elements in the text, as well as to explain their connection to the symbols, myths, beliefs, and social values that shape the cultural identity of the Malian people. This study also aims to explain how Amadou Hampâté Bâ succeeded in transforming oral tradition into a modern narrative discourse without losing its cultural distinctiveness or ecological symbols, thereby making this novel a significant example of the creative interaction between literature, the environment, and culture.

The significance of this study is based on several interrelated considerations. From a theoretical perspective, this study is expected to enrich Arabic-language scholarship on African literature through the application of ecocritical and cultural anthropological perspectives in

analyzing a Malian literary work that has, to date, received little attention. From a methodological perspective, this study offers an integrative analytical model that combines two contemporary critical approaches, thereby enabling a reading of the text from various perspectives that go beyond conventional thematic analysis. Meanwhile, from a practical standpoint, this study affirms the literary and cultural value of Kaïdara's novel and demonstrates its ability to represent issues of the environment, identity, and collective memory through a cohesive narrative structure. Thus, this study is expected to strengthen the position of Malian literature in comparative literary studies while opening opportunities for further research on the relationship between literature, the environment, and culture in African literature.

This research has also gained increasing relevance as global attention to environmental issues and sustainable development has grown. This demonstrates that literature not only serves an aesthetic function but also plays a role in shaping ecological and cultural awareness, as well as instilling values of respect for nature and the importance of maintaining a balance between humans and their environment. The novel Kaïdara demonstrates that these values are not concepts imported from outside African culture but are, in fact, deeply rooted in the intellectual and spiritual heritage of African societies. Thus, Malian literature makes a significant contribution to various contemporary discussions on the environment, sustainable development, and cultural identity.

Based on the above discussion, this study develops a critical perspective that positions the environment and culture as central axes in understanding the structure of thought in the novel Kaïdara. Grounded in the concepts of ecocriticism and cultural anthropology, this study seeks to analyze the text, uncover its symbolic system, and elucidate the dialectical relationship between humans and nature within the narrative world. Based on this perspective, the following section outlines the research methodology and analytical procedures used as the foundation for discussing environmental representations, cultural manifestations, and the mechanisms through which the two interact in shaping the vision of humanity presented by Amadou Hampâté Bâ.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive-analytical method as the approach best suited to the characteristics and objectives of the research. This method allows the researcher to systematically describe the literary, cultural, and environmental phenomena found in the novel Kaïdara, and then analyze them based on two main theoretical frameworks: ecocriticism and cultural anthropology. The descriptive-analytical method is not limited to depicting textual phenomena but also seeks to explain their narrative, cultural, and philosophical functions, as well as to reveal the relationships

among these elements within the novel's structure. Therefore, this method is considered particularly well-suited for analyzing literary works that demonstrate an integration of environmental, symbolic, and cultural elements (Creswell, 2014; Miles et al., 2014).

This study is grounded in an ecocritical perspective that views nature not merely as a neutral space where events unfold, but as an active element that plays a role in shaping literary discourse and generating meaning. On this basis, ecocritical concepts are used to analyze the representation of the natural environment in the novel, while also uncovering the symbolic and semantic functions performed by the desert, water, plants, animals, and various other natural spaces. The analysis also aims to explain how these elements contribute to character development, plot progression, and the conveyance of the novel's philosophical vision regarding the relationship between humans and nature (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2012).

At the same time, this study draws on concepts from cultural anthropology, given that Kaïdara's novel is an extension of Mali's oral tradition and traditional culture. Many of the symbols that appear in the novel can only be understood within the cultural context that gave rise to them. Cultural anthropology was chosen because it is one of the most effective approaches for explaining the meanings of symbols, customs, belief systems, mythology, and rituals that form the deepest structure of a culture. Furthermore, this approach also helps explain the relationship between humans and their environment as a social and symbolic relationship that goes beyond the material exploitation of nature (Geertz, 1973).

Based on the integration of these two approaches, this study views the novel as both a literary text and a cultural text. On the one hand, the novel is a narrative work constructed through storytelling techniques, symbols, and literary aesthetics. On the other hand, the novel also functions as a cultural document that represents the Malian people's views on nature, humanity, knowledge, and life. Therefore, the analysis is not limited to artistic aspects alone but also encompasses the environmental, cultural, and intellectual dimensions embedded in the novel's discourse.

The primary data source for this study is Amadou Hampâté Bâ's novel Kaïdara, which serves as the main corpus for analysis. In addition, this study also draws on various theoretical references and scientific sources in Arabic and other languages that discuss ecocriticism, cultural anthropology, African literature, Malian literature, as well as previous research on the works of Amadou Hampâté Bâ. All of these sources are used to construct a comprehensive interpretive framework to support the findings of the analysis and connect them to previous scholarly developments.

Data collection was conducted through careful and repeated readings of the novel, paying special attention to passages that explicitly depict the environment or cultural symbols. Next, the data were classified into a number of thematic units according to their respective characteristics and functions within the text. This classification included elements of the natural environment, cultural symbols, belief systems and rituals, symbolic stories, and patterns of interaction between characters and their environment. This stage aimed to organize the data systematically to facilitate the analysis process.

Data analysis was conducted through several interrelated stages. The first stage involved identifying narrative scenes that featured environmental elements. The next stage analyzed the aesthetic, symbolic, and philosophical functions of these elements based on ecocritical concepts. Subsequently, the cultural meanings associated with these elements are interpreted through a cultural anthropological perspective by relating them to the social and cultural context of Malian society. In the final stage, all the results of the partial analyses are synthesized into a comprehensive interpretive framework to explain the relationship between the environment and culture, as well as their role in shaping the vision of humanity presented in the novel.

To ensure a higher level of scientific validity, this study does not rely solely on a direct description of the text but also engages in an ongoing dialogue between textual evidence, theoretical concepts, and the findings of previous research. Thus, the conclusions drawn are the result of systematic scientific analysis, not merely the researcher's subjective impressions. Furthermore, the entire analytical process was conducted while maintaining the principle of the interconnection between the text and its cultural context and avoiding the application of theoretical concepts not supported by evidence within the novel's text.

Based on this methodology, the research discussion is structured as an integrated analysis that combines the results and discussion into a single, coherent line of argumentation consistent with the nature of this study. The discussion begins with an analysis of the representation of the natural environment in the novel *Kaïdara*, along with its narrative and symbolic functions. Next, the discussion shifts to the cultural dimension, which is manifested through the use of oral traditions, mythology, local wisdom, and the social values of Malian society. Following that, the reciprocal relationship between humans and the environment is analyzed, highlighting the philosophical foundations and ethical values that underpin this relationship in traditional African culture. Finally, the discussion focuses on analyzing the integration of environment and culture in shaping the novel's intellectual and humanistic vision. Based on this comprehensive analytical process, this study then formulates key findings regarding how Amadou Hampâté Bâ utilizes environmental and cultural elements to construct a narrative discourse that represents Mali's

cultural identity, strengthens collective memory, fosters ecological awareness, and preserves the cultural heritage of his people.

3. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Amadou Hampâté Bâ's novel *Kaïdara* presents a literary vision that transcends the conventional aesthetic function of narrative by constructing a cultural and ecological discourse that reflects the African worldview regarding the relationship between humans and nature. From the very beginning of the narrative, the environment is not presented as a neutral setting in which characters move, but rather as an active element that helps shape human experience and generate knowledge. This perspective aligns with ecocritical ideas, which view nature in literary works not as merely a geographical space but as a structural component that plays a role in constructing meaning while also guiding the narrative's development (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Buell, 1995). Thus, the relationship between literature and the environment in this novel is not merely one of representation but a reciprocal relationship that demonstrates how the environment shapes the characters just as the characters reveal how they understand nature.

The desert occupies a central position in the novel's narrative structure, not only because it serves as the primary setting for the journey but also because it fulfills symbolic and philosophical functions that extend far beyond geographical boundaries. In traditional West African culture, the desert is often associated with trials, patience, contemplation, and the journey from ignorance to knowledge. Amadou Hampâté Bâ draws on all these meanings to shape the story's development. Crossing the desert does not merely mean moving from one place to another; rather, it is an inner journey that takes a person through various stages of learning, self-discovery, and reevaluation of their perspective on life. Thus, nature becomes a teacher that educates humanity, while the environment serves as a medium for gaining wisdom. This perspective aligns with the ecocritical view, which acknowledges that the natural world possesses intellectual and moral value—not merely utilitarian value.

This function is fulfilled not only by the desert but also by various other elements of nature, each of which serves as a cultural symbol. Water, for example, in the African cultural imagination symbolizes life, renewal, and purity. Therefore, its presence in the novel goes beyond a merely material function; rather, it is closely tied to the meanings of purification, transformation, and the transition to a higher level of knowledge. Similarly, trees and plants serve as repositories of collective memory because, in Malian culture, they are associated with the council of elders, the transmission of experience, and the continuity of life. Meanwhile, animals serve a symbolic function that reflects moral values and social virtues far beyond their mere

biological characteristics. The way the author utilizes these elements demonstrates that nature is not viewed as an external object but rather as a symbolic language that expresses the culture itself.

This perspective shows that Kaïdara's novel is rooted in a literary tradition grounded in oral heritage, in which the relationship between humans and nature is built on the principles of balance and harmony. The environment is not exploited solely as an economic resource but is respected as part of the ethical system that sustains community life. This perspective contrasts with the modern view that separates humans from nature and treats nature as an object of domination. Instead, the novel presents humans as an integral part of a cosmic order responsible for maintaining the harmony of all its components. This philosophy demonstrates that ecological awareness has long been embedded in traditional Malian culture; thus, concern for the environment is not a new phenomenon but has deep historical roots in African thought.

On the other hand, this novel also demonstrates that the environment does not generate meaning on its own, but rather derives its significance through culture. It is at this point that cultural anthropology plays a crucial role, as it views culture as a network of symbols that enables humans to understand the world (Geertz, 1973). The ecological symbols in the novel cannot be understood when separated from the cultural context in which they originated. The value of the desert, water, and animals is determined not only by their natural characteristics but also by the accumulation of beliefs, folklore, proverbs, and social values that have developed around them. Therefore, reading the novel from a cultural perspective reveals that nature is transformed into a text that runs parallel to the literary text itself and can only be understood through a grasp of the symbolic structure of Malian society.

This connection becomes increasingly evident through the presence of oral traditions in the novel. Amadou Hampâté Bâ utilizes mythology, folklore, and local wisdom not merely as aesthetic elements, but as mechanisms for passing down knowledge from one generation to the next. This use of oral tradition demonstrates that in Malian society, oral culture serves not only to preserve history but also to teach how humans interact with nature and respect the moral laws that govern it. Therefore, this novel not only preserves cultural memory but also revives the ecological knowledge system embedded within that memory through a form of modern literature that remains relevant to today's readers.

The results of the analysis show that Amadou Hampâté Bâ successfully constructs a narrative discourse that reveals a close integration between the environment and culture, such that the two cannot be understood in isolation. Nature in the novel is not merely the setting of the story, while culture is not merely the social context for the characters. Both are mutually

indispensable to each other's existence. Thus, *Kaïdara* can be viewed as an important example of African environmental literature that not only calls for the preservation of nature from a biological perspective but also affirms that protecting the environment means safeguarding cultural identity, collective memory, and the sustainability of civilization.

Furthermore, the research findings show that this perspective offers a humanistic dimension that transcends the boundaries of Malian society. The harmonious relationship between humans and nature depicted in the novel is not bound by any specific time or place; rather, it offers an ethical vision that can contribute to various contemporary discussions on the environment, sustainable development, and cultural diversity. Thus, the intellectual value of this novel lies in its ability to present a distinctly African ecological perspective that redefines the relationship between humans and the natural world based on the principles of respect, balance, and shared responsibility. This establishes *Kaïdara* as one of the most significant works in modern African literature and demonstrates that the application of ecocriticism and cultural anthropology can reveal layers of meaning that remain hidden when the work is analyzed solely through narrative or linguistic approaches.

An examination of the relationship between literature and the environment in *Kaïdara*'s novel would not be complete without exploring the concept of ecological knowledge, which serves as one of the work's primary intellectual foundations. The novel does not view knowledge as the product of formal education or abstract rational thought, but rather as the result of human interaction with nature. The journey undertaken by the characters is not aimed at reaching a specific destination, but rather at gaining wisdom through direct experience with the environment, reflecting on the laws of nature, and understanding the various signs and symbols it contains. Thus, nature serves simultaneously as a space for education and a space for knowledge. This perspective aligns with the ecocritical view, which asserts that literature redefines the relationship between humans and the environment as one of learning and responsibility, rather than one of exploitation and domination (Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2012).

This novel also demonstrates that true knowledge can only be attained when humans recognize themselves as part of the natural order, rather than as beings separate from it. The characters who successfully complete the journey are not those who are physically the strongest or materially the wealthiest, but rather those who are able to read the signs of nature and understand the cultural and spiritual meanings they hold. This concept reflects an African philosophy that views wisdom not as the result of conquering nature, but as the result of the ability to listen, understand, and live in harmony with nature's rhythms. Therefore, the environment

serves not only as a teacher but also as a moral yardstick that measures a person's level of maturity and their ability to forge harmonious relationships with the world.

This ethical dimension becomes increasingly clear when the relationship between humans and other living beings is analyzed. In this novel, animals are not reduced to biological entities but take on symbolic and cultural functions that transcend their physical existence. This is closely tied to traditional African cultural perspectives, which often position animals as bearers of wisdom or as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual worlds. Therefore, the presence of animals in oral literary traditions is more closely associated with moral education than with mere realistic depiction. Amadou Hampâté Bâ adapts this heritage into his novel, transforming various living creatures into vehicles for reflection on human behavior as well as symbols of the values that should govern human relationships with nature and with one another.

The same is true of plants and trees, which in Malian cultural imagination hold meanings that go far beyond their role as elements of the environment. Trees symbolize continuity, fertility, life, and collective memory. In many African societies, trees have long served as places for deliberation, conflict resolution, educating the younger generation, and passing down life experiences. Consequently, trees hold a very powerful symbolic status in oral traditions. By introducing these symbols, the author emphasizes that the environment is not merely an economic resource but also a repository of collective culture. The loss of the environment simultaneously means the loss of part of a community's historical memory and cultural identity.

The same applies to plants and trees, which, in the cultural imagination of Mali, hold profound significance. This observation leads to a deeper conclusion: Kaïdara's novel presents culture as an ecological system while simultaneously presenting the environment as a cultural system. Culture, as depicted in the novel, does not emerge in a vacuum but develops in response to the environmental conditions in which humans live. Myths, folktales, rituals, proverbs, and patterns of social behavior are all shaped through a long-standing interaction between society and its natural environment. Thus, the boundary between nature and culture almost entirely disappears within the novel because every natural element carries cultural meaning, while every cultural practice has an ecological foundation.

These observations lead to a deeper conclusion: Kaïdara's novel presents culture as an ecological system while simultaneously presenting the environment as a cultural system. Culture, as depicted in the novel, does not emerge in a vacuum but develops in response to the environmental conditions in which humans live. Myths, folktales, rituals, proverbs, and patterns of social behavior are all shaped through a long-standing interaction between society and its

natural environment. Thus, the boundary between nature and culture almost entirely disappears within the novel because every natural element carries cultural meaning, while every cultural practice has an ecological foundation.

This view aligns with Clifford Geertz's theory, which regards culture as a network of meanings created by humans to understand and interpret the world (Geertz, 1973). However, the novel *Kaïdara* expands on this perspective by demonstrating that this network of meanings itself is shaped through an ongoing historical relationship between humans and nature. The environment is not merely an object interpreted by culture, but also one of the primary sources from which culture emerges. Therefore, the relationship between the two is reciprocal and cannot be understood unilaterally.

From this perspective, it can be said that Amadou Hampâté Bâ offers a conception that differs from the modern dichotomy that separates humans from nature. In many traditions of modern Western thought, nature is often positioned as something external to humans and must be conquered through rationality. In contrast, in *Kaïdara*, humans can only achieve perfection when they live in harmony with their environment and respect its laws and symbols. Therefore, the success of one's journey is not measured by the possession of wealth or power, but by the wisdom that enables humans to build a balanced relationship with the natural and cultural worlds.

The analysis also reveals that this novel does not convey a message of environmental conservation through direct moral sermons or slogans. Instead, environmental values are gradually established through the unfolding of the narrative, resulting in an ecological discourse that is both aesthetic and philosophical. The author does not impose a specific stance on readers but invites them to reexamine their perspective on nature through a narrative world that integrates wisdom, mythology, symbolism, and human experience into a single, cohesive whole.

On the other hand, this novel also emphasizes that environmental conservation cannot be separated from cultural preservation. The oral traditions that form the backbone of the narrative not only pass down stories and wisdom but also preserve ecological knowledge handed down across generations, govern how communities utilize natural resources, and instill values of balance, respect, and moderation. Therefore, the loss of oral traditions does not merely signify the loss of a part of cultural history, but also the loss of a knowledge system that has long governed the relationship between humans and nature.

Based on this overall discussion, *Kaïdara* can be viewed as a cultural project aimed at preserving the ecological memory of the Malian people through its transformation into a modern novel. Amadou Hampâté Bâ succeeded in achieving this goal because he not only documented

elements of tradition but also reinterpreted them and connected them to contemporary human issues. Thus, this novel serves as a bridge connecting the past with the present, traditional knowledge with modern environmental issues, and local culture with universal human values. This is what makes **Kaïdara** one of the most important representations of African literature in the contemporary intellectual dialogue on identity, culture, and the environment.

A more in-depth reading of the novel *Kaïdara* leads to one key conclusion: that Amadou Hampâté Bâ does not merely seek to reproduce traditional stories as a cultural heritage that must be preserved, but also uses them to reconstruct a comprehensive philosophical vision of human existence. Although the novel draws on elements of oral literature, mythology, and symbolism, it is not confined to the past but is open to universal questions concerning knowledge, power, ethics, identity, and humanity's relationship with the universe. Therefore, the presence of the environment and culture within the text is not an end in itself, but rather a means to redefine humanity and its place within the cosmos. It is this that lends the novel a philosophical dimension, allowing it to transcend the boundaries of local literature and reach a broader humanistic horizon.

This dimension is clearly evident in the way the author reimagines the concept of the journey. In the tradition of classical literature, the journey is generally associated with the exploration of new territories, the search for wealth, or the attainment of glory. However, in *Kaïdara*, the journey transforms into a process of intellectual and moral purification. The path taken by the characters is not merely a geographical journey, but a transition from superficial understanding to a deeper awareness of the essence of life. Each stage of the journey teaches that knowledge is not gained through speed or strength, but through patience, humility, and the ability to listen to the wisdom embedded in both nature and culture. Thus, the environment serves as a medium for human formation, while culture functions as an ethical framework that provides direction and meaning to this process.

Through this kind of narrative construction, Amadou Hampâté Bâ implicitly critiques the materialistic tendency to measure human worth based on power or wealth. This novel demonstrates that material wealth can be a source of misguidance if not accompanied by wisdom, and that true knowledge is always closely linked to moral responsibility toward fellow human beings and toward nature. This idea offers a critical dimension that transcends the context of Malian society, as it addresses contemporary global issues such as the environmental crisis, the dominance of consumerist culture, and the gradual erosion of traditional values rooted in balance and respect for natural resources.

The results of this study also show that the relationship between environment and culture in the novel is not a parallel one, but rather a mutually generative relationship. The environment shapes culture through its influence on ways of life, belief systems, and social symbols, while culture imbues the environment with new meaning through a set of values, norms, and rituals that govern human relationships with nature. Consequently, nature is no longer understood as an external object to culture, but rather as one of its constituent elements. Conversely, culture is not merely a passive reflection of environmental conditions, but serves as a mechanism that imbues nature with moral and spiritual dimensions. Thus, this novel presents a holistic vision that rejects the separation between the natural and the cultural, and affirms that the preservation of one is only possible through the preservation of the other.

The analysis also shows that Amadou Hampâté Bâ's engagement with oral traditions goes beyond the mere use of folktales, proverbs, or traditional symbols; rather, it serves as both an artistic and intellectual strategy to reclaim traditional African knowledge as a legitimate source of thought with universal value. Amid various perspectives that reduce African culture to mere folklore or mythology, this novel instead presents these traditions as a system of knowledge capable of explaining the world, establishing an ethical framework, and guiding human behavior. Therefore, the cultural value of this novel lies not only in its success in preserving traditional heritage but also in its ability to reconstruct that heritage into a modern narrative that blends cultural authenticity with openness to contemporary intellectual issues.

From an ecocritical perspective, this novel asserts that environmental crises cannot be resolved through technical solutions alone, as the root of the problem lies in the cultural and ethical patterns of human relationships with nature. Therefore, reviving the values of balance, moderation, respect, and harmony - as reflected in traditional cultures - is one of the key prerequisites for rebuilding those relationships. In this sense, Kaïdara does not merely describe nature but offers an environmental philosophy that views the sustainability of human life as dependent on the sustainability of ethical relationships with the natural world. This perspective shares many commonalities with principles developed in contemporary ecocriticism, while still retaining the distinctive character of African culture.

Meanwhile, from a cultural anthropological perspective, the analysis shows that this novel presents a model that can be termed "ecological culture" - an integrated system that unites symbols, rituals, beliefs, and traditional knowledge in regulating human relationships with the land, water, plants, and animals. These elements are not portrayed as relics of the past that have lost their relevance, but rather as a system of meaning that remains capable of generating knowledge, guiding behavior, and maintaining social and ecological balance. Thus, this novel

demonstrates that culture is not merely the collective memory of a society, but also a vital mechanism for environmental protection and the sustainability of communal life.

Based on the overall findings of this study, it can be concluded that the novel *Kaïdara* makes a very significant contribution to African literature because it successfully combines aesthetic, epistemological, and cultural functions simultaneously. As a work of literature, this novel is built upon the beauty of symbolism, mythology, and storytelling techniques. At the same time, it also offers a comprehensive philosophical vision of the relationship between humans and nature, revives oral traditions as a source of knowledge and identity, and affirms that the environment is not a peripheral element in human life, but rather the primary foundation for the formation of culture and society.

Thus, this study confirms that Amadou Hampâté Bâ successfully constructed a narrative discourse that positions the environment and culture as the two main pillars of meaning-making. The use of these two dimensions is not merely an aesthetic or descriptive choice, but an intellectual one that reflects his view of humanity and the world. The findings also demonstrate that ecocritical and cultural anthropological approaches provide highly appropriate theoretical frameworks for uncovering the deep layers of meaning in this novel. Both approaches demonstrate that the relationship between literature, the environment, and culture in *Kaïdara* is a structural one that unites natural symbols, collective memory, traditional knowledge, and narrative constructions to produce a discourse on humanity that calls for balance, respect for nature, and the preservation of cultural identity.

Overall, this discussion concludes that *Kaïdara* is not merely a literary work rooted in the Malian tradition, but also an intellectual and cultural project that demonstrates literature's ability to preserve collective memory, foster ecological awareness, and instill universal human values. Through a harmonious blend of environment, culture, and narrative, Amadou Hampâté Bâ successfully presents a model of African literature rich in philosophical depth and symbolism, while affirming that humanity's future depends on its ability to maintain a balance between nature and culture, between traditional heritage and the demands of the modern age. It is this perspective that makes *Kaïdara* one of the most important works in modern African literature and ensures its continued relevance for analysis through various contemporary literary critical approaches.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze the relationship between literature, the environment, and culture in Amadou Hampâté Bâ's novel *Kaïdara* through the application of ecocriticism and cultural anthropology. This study is based on the assumption that the environment in the novel

does not merely serve a spatial or aesthetic function but also constitutes a cultural and symbolic structure that plays a role in shaping the work's intellectual vision and generating its humanistic meanings. The results of the analysis show that this novel presents a holistic concept of the relationship between humans and nature, grounded in balance, integration, and mutual respect. This concept reflects the traditional philosophy that has developed in various African societies, particularly within the cultural context of Mali, which served as the primary source of inspiration for Amadou Hampâté Bâ's narrative and thought.

This study also shows that natural elements such as deserts, water, plants, and animals do not merely serve as descriptive or decorative elements in the novel, but rather transform into a symbolic system closely intertwined with social values, spiritual beliefs, and the collective memory of the community. Deserts symbolize a space for the search for truth and a test of inner resolve; water represents life, renewal, and purification; trees and plants symbolize continuity, fertility, and memory; while animals serve ethical and educational functions rooted in African oral traditions. Through this symbolism, the author successfully makes the environment a structural element in the formation of narrative discourse while transforming nature into a cultural language that is productive in generating meaning.

Furthermore, this study shows that culture in Kaïdara's novel does not merely appear in the form of social practices or traditional rituals, but manifests as an integrated system comprising symbols, folktales, mythology, proverbs, and various forms of wisdom that reinterpret the natural world and define the ideal patterns of relationship between humans and their environment. This intertwining of environment and culture gives rise to a narrative vision that transcends the traditional dichotomy between humans and nature. The novel asserts that the two continuously shape one another, so that environmental conservation cannot be separated from the preservation of cultural heritage and collective memory.

The research findings also demonstrate that Amadou Hampâté Bâ did not utilize oral tradition merely as an element of folklore or artistic ornamentation, but rather reconstructed it into a modern narrative discourse that combines aesthetic and epistemological dimensions. Through this strategy, the novel serves as a space for preserving traditional African wisdom and, at the same time, as a medium for reintroducing it in a literary form capable of engaging with contemporary readers. Thus, this work demonstrates that traditional knowledge remains relevant in addressing the ecological and cultural challenges faced by the modern world.

From a theoretical perspective, this study affirms that the integration of ecocritical and cultural anthropological approaches provides a more comprehensive analytical framework for

understanding African literature, as it allows the environment to be understood as a cultural construction while simultaneously enabling culture to be understood as the result of historical human interactions with the environment. This integrated approach successfully reveals various layers of profound meaning in the novel that are difficult to explain through formal or narratological approaches alone. This also underscores the importance of an interdisciplinary approach in the study of contemporary African literature.

The scientific contribution of this study lies in its effort to expand the body of Arabic-language scholarship on Malian literature through a new reading of Kaïdara's novel that integrates ecological and cultural dimensions. Furthermore, this study offers an applied model for the use of ecocriticism and cultural anthropology in the analysis of African literary works, thereby opening up opportunities for future research on the works of Amadou Hampâté Bâ and other West African literary works using modern literary critical approaches.

Nevertheless, this study still has limitations related to its scope and the methods used. The analysis focused on only one novel; therefore, the results cannot yet be generalized to all Malian literature or African literature as a whole. Therefore, future research is encouraged to conduct comparative studies between Kaïdara and other African novels or poetry, or to employ different theoretical approaches - such as postcolonial ecocriticism, cultural memory studies, or ecological narratology - so that our understanding of the relationship between literature, the environment, and culture in the African context can be further deepened.

Based on these overall findings, this study concludes that the novel Kaïdara is an important literary work that successfully blends aesthetic, epistemological, and cultural functions in a harmonious manner. Through the use of the environment, oral traditions, and philosophical symbolism, Amadou Hampâté Bâ constructs a literary discourse that affirms that humanity, nature, and culture form an inseparable existential unity. Any disruption to one of these elements will affect the others. Therefore, this novel not only serves to preserve the cultural memory of the Malian people but also offers a universal vision of humanity that calls for the rebuilding of the relationship between humans and the environment based on the principles of respect, balance, and sustainability. This is what gives Kaïdara a special place in modern African literature while maintaining its relevance as a work that continues to generate meaning and spark intellectual reflection amid contemporary ecological and cultural challenges.

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