

Dante Today: Dante in West Africa

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Background

- Since its debut, Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* (1321) has profoundly influenced culture and media globally.
- The epic poem follows Dante as a pilgrim during his journey through Hell (Inferno), his ascent (during Purgatorio) to Heaven (Paradiso), first accompanied by the poet Virgil and then Dante's love interest Beatrice. In Inferno, which is the most recognizable canticle, Virgil guides Dante through Hell, showing him the Circles of Hell and the unique punishments assigned to sinners in each Circle.
- In art and literature, artists and writers have reinterpreted *The Divine Comedy* referencing the poem to communicate certain themes in their work.
- Dr. Elizabeth Coggeshall and Dr Arielle Saiber created *Dante Today*, a digital archive that catalogs references to Dante in media.
- While the archive has many references across Europe, North America, and even Eastern Africa, it lacks West African references to Dante.



Image of the Adum bowstring footbridge, part of the *Occupation* series (2014) by Ibrahim Mahama, a Ghanaian artist inspired by Dante's *Inferno*.

Further Discussion

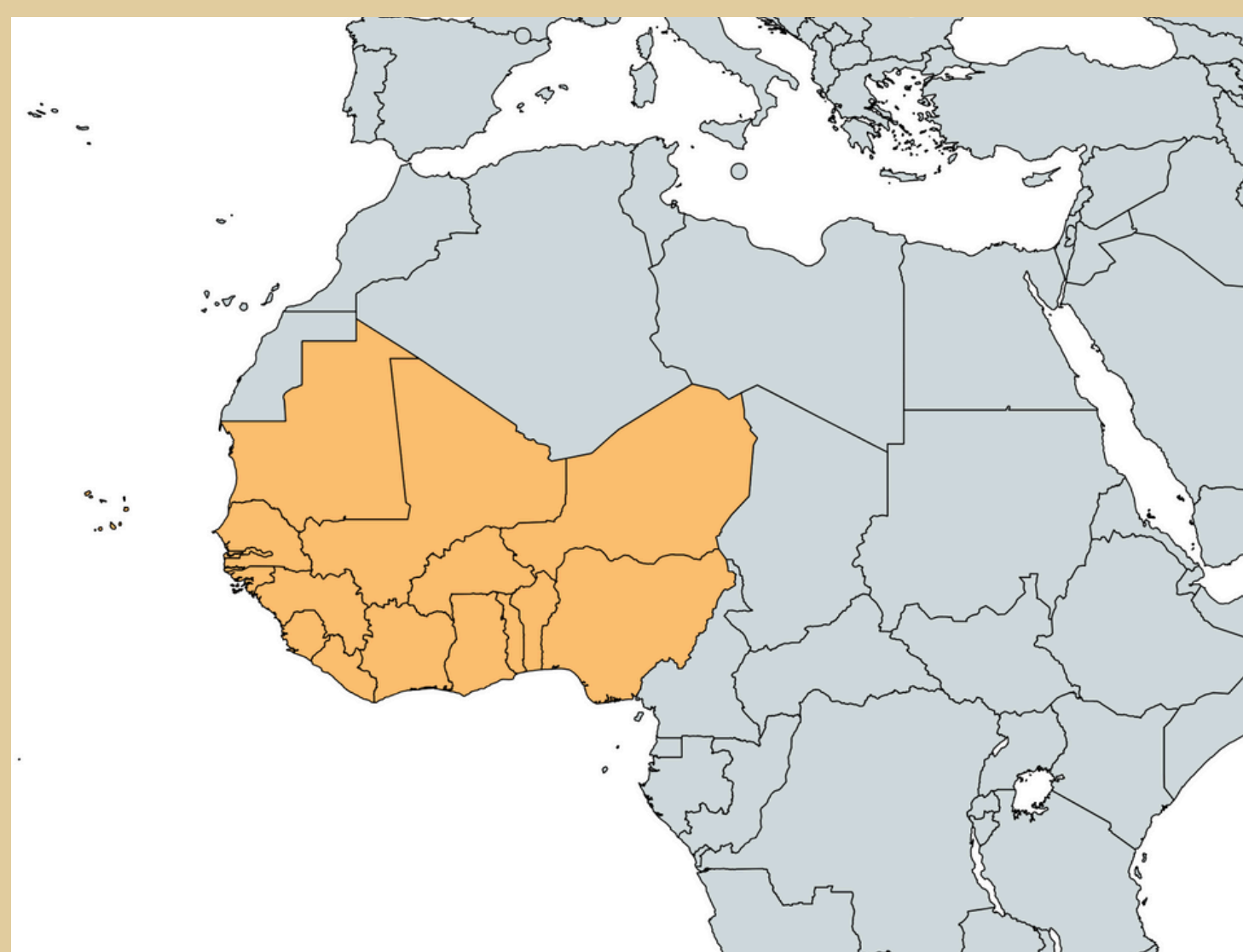
- Many of the entries shared themes and overlapped in how they referenced Dante. It would be valuable to explore these themes and analyze their connection to the poem.
- Creators also often referenced parts of *Inferno* to describe violence and environmental destruction within their home countries. "Hell," as a general theme, reoccurs and appears in various ways within the different works.
- In Eastern Africa, the legacy of Italian colonialism and the Italian education system has led to many artistic responses to *The Divine Comedy*. It would be interesting to compare Dante's influence across the continent to understand this relationship better and investigate how West Africans encounter the poem by contrast.



Credit: Getty Images

Image of an oil tanker on fire, which feature in several of the references from Nigerian creators.

I defined "West Africa" for the purposes of the project to be sixteen countries.



Method

- To effectively find new references to Dante in West Africa, I created a list of search engine terms. For example, using combinations like "Ghana" and "Dante Alighieri" in the same search yielded results.
- Using these terms, I was able to find ten references to Dante. Once I found potential entries, I compared them to a list of criteria that confirmed them as West African references to Dante.
- The criteria included: they must either have West African creators or be made in a West African country (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo). They must also discuss a topic from within West Africa.
- If they met the criteria, I added them to the archive using the archive's submission form.

Findings

- To add to *Dante Today's* West African sources, I found a variety of potential references, primarily from English-speaking creators in Ghana and Nigeria.
- I found references across mediums, including novels, news articles, paintings, and other forms of art work.
- Most of the references that I found were from anglophone countries, which could be because of limitations from the search engine's algorithm or a lack of relevant key terms for non-anglophone countries.
- Several entries from Nigerian creators specifically discussed Dante's Inferno canticle in reference to the oil industry and the local epidemic of oil tanker accidents.
- Many of the references included themes of colonialism, environmental destruction, and other human rights-related discourse.



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References



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