

## **Burkinabè Dictator-Novels and the Struggle against Impunity**

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### ABSTRACT

In December 1998 the body of the Burkinabè novelist and newspaper editor Norbert Zongo was found in his burned-out vehicle in the village of Sapouy. He had become a victim of the impunity of the dictatorial regime of Burkina Faso's president, Blaise Compaoré. Sten Hagberg contends that the killing of Norbert Zongo characterised a certain political culture and was thus perceived as the starting-point for an organised and widely mobilised socio-political struggle against impunity (Hagberg 31). Strikes and riots characterised the struggle to bring justice for Zongo and other victims for whose deaths the perpetrators had been neither tried nor punished. It was time that impunity came to an end, it was argued, before any rule of law could be real (Hagberg 219). While the critical focus has rested predominantly on the socio-political dynamics of this struggle, this article contends that the fight against impunity also found expression in Zongo's outspoken journalism and in his fictional work, as well as that of his contemporaries. This article traces the critique of impunity in Zongo's *Le Parachutage* (1989), and in the later Burkinabè novels of Patrick Ilboudo and Loro Mazono. I approach these Burkinabè novels as dictator-novels and argue that while a focus on the aesthetic qualities of these texts is important, they must also be read as part of the sustained fight for accountability in contemporary Burkina Faso.

Béni soit le jour où des Africains pourront défiler, pancartes à la main, pas pour sublimer souvent le règne d'un cancre, médiocre tyran drapé de "démocratie", mais pour désapprouver la politique d'un pouvoir dont ils auraient contribué à asseoir les fondements de sa légitimité.

(Norbert Zongo, "Avant-Propos", *Le Parachutage*, 8)

Blessed will be the day when the African people will be able to march freely, holding protest-signs aloft, not to simply protest the reign of cancerous and mediocre regimes, nor to react against tyrannies that masquerade as 'democracies'. Those who protest will wield a wholly different kind of power, a power that they themselves have created and made legitimate.

## INTRODUCTION

The term impunity conveys a sense of wrongdoers escaping justice or accountability that describes the actions of many post-independence African leaders, who frequently placed themselves above the law. Rapid changes to constitutions at independence in the 1960s resulted in the concentration of power in the hands of these new leaders, while the absence of checks and balances or an independent judiciary enabled them to evade responsibility for their actions. Amnesty International defines impunity as arising:

at any stage before, during or after the judicial process: in not investigating the crimes;  
in not bringing the suspected culprits to trial; in not reaching a verdict or convicting

them, despite the existence of convincing evidence which would establish their guilt beyond a reasonable doubt; in not sentencing those convicted, or sentencing them to derisory punishments out of all proportion to the gravity of their crimes; in not enforcing their sentences. (158)

With regard to Burkina Faso, Sten Hagberg remarks that “The issue of impunity--that is, the freedom from punishment for ‘blood’ and economic crimes committed by holders of political power--has recently become a leading theme in Burkinabè politics in general, and in the popular and trade union movement ‘Trop c’est trop’ [Enough is enough] in particular”(218). Indeed, impunity forms part of a specific historical trajectory in Burkinabè politics that, since independence from France in 1960, has been defined by a succession of military dictatorships.

Claimed by the French in 1896 and incorporated into *L’Afrique Occidentale Française* (French West Africa), Upper Volta gained formal independence on 5 August 1960. A landlocked nation, with few profitable resources and divided along ethnic lines, Upper Volta received little investment or political leadership from the French under colonial rule, and it was economically and politically ill-equipped for independence (Phelan, 108). The first two decades of the nation’s independence were characterised by strikes, military coups and constitutional referendums. Maurice Yaméogo became the first President of Upper Volta at independence from France, eliminating political opposition to establish the pre-eminence of his own party, the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (African Democratic Union) in what Phelan describes as a ‘clumsy and arrogant’ drive towards single-party authoritarian rule (113). Yaméogo was deposed by General Sangoulé Lamizana in the wake of a national strike in 1966 and a provisional military government held power for four years until 1970, suspending the constitution and dissolving the National Assembly. Lamizana was to remain in power as President of a military and then a civil-military government until 1980, when he

was overthrown by Colonel Saye Zerbo in a bloodless coup. After only two years in power, Zerbo was in turn overthrown by Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo and the Conseil de Salut du Peuple (Council of Popular Salvation) in a 1982 *coup d'état*. Although opposition parties were banned, the Conseil promised that there would be a transition to civilian rule and a new constitution. However, infighting broke out between factions within the party. On 4 August 1983, political life took a sudden radical populist turn when the charismatic Captain Thomas Sankara seized power in a popular coup, establishing the *Conseil National pour la Révolution* (National Council for the Revolution). In a series of reforms that included changing the name of Upper Volta to Burkina Faso,<sup>1</sup> Sankara captured the imagination of people at home and overseas. His popularity stemmed from his fight against corruption, progress in health policy and in the promotion of women, although his regime and its institutions were criticised by others as repressive (Engels 1).

Sankara's supporters argue that his short four-year reign as President of Burkina Faso pointed briefly to the possibility of a different political future for Africans. However, the Sankara era was to end abruptly when, on 15 October 1987, armed men burst into his office, killing him and twelve of his aides in a violent *coup d'état*. On the following day, Sankara's deputy, Blaise Compaoré, declared himself president. Compaoré was to remain in power for 27 years until 31 October 2014. His authoritarian regime was defined by violence, repression and corruption. Above all, he has been criticised for the regime's culture of impunity which, Hagberg remarks, is generally held to have emerged after the *coup d'état* in October 1987, although some argue that it dates from the Revolution of 1983 (231).

## THE LIFE AND DEATH OF NORBERT ZONGO

In December 1998 the body of the Burkinabè novelist and newspaper editor Norbert Zongo was found in his burned-out vehicle in the village of Sapouy. It was immediately evident that

he had become another victim of the impunity of Compaoré's regime. Zongo had begun his journalism while still at school, with the publication of his first newspaper *La Voix du Cours Normal* (The Voice of the High School) in 1964. He would listen to the BBC, RFI and other international radio stations and then produce his own news bulletins on paper from his exercise books (Soré 23). *La Voix du Cours Normal* was subsequently banned for its political content. When he finished school in 1971, Zongo became a teacher in Ouagadougou, and then studied law at the University of Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire. In 1979, he studied journalism at the University of Lomé in Togo, but was dismissed because of the publication of his controversial novel *Le Parachutage*. Supported by his friend and mentor, the Ivoirian writer Ahmadou Kourouma, he continued his studies in journalism at the University of Yaoundé in Cameroon before returning to Burkina Faso to work as a journalist on the national newspaper *Sidwaya* and for *Carrefour Africain*.

In June 1993, Zongo founded the weekly newspaper *L'Indépendant*, which was widely read. On launching the paper, he declared its position in no uncertain terms: 'L'Indépendant sera indépendant ou ne sera pas' 'The Independent will be independent or it will no longer exist' (*L'Indépendant* 2 juin 1993). Not only was Zongo the newspaper's editor, but he also wrote columns under the pen name Henri Segbo that were known for their brutal honesty and humour, enlightening the public by exposing the affairs of the Burkinabè elite. He later became President of the Association of Independent Newspaper Editors in Burkina Faso. Zongo was outspoken where he saw injustice and received many threats in the course of his life, but he was not to be silenced. *L'Indépendant* became the outlet for his critique of political rule in Burkina Faso even though, as Ramata Soré remarks, "The political atmosphere, resulting from many years of instability and military rule in Burkina Faso, coupled with the lack of a real democracy and freedom of the press, [...] made the work of the journalist unimaginably difficult" (2008).

Zongo was outspoken about limitations imposed on the free press and expressed his frustration in a 1997 interview with Keith Harman Snow for *L'Indépendant*:

Burkina Faso has laws against Freedom of Press, but the Constitution lays out laws about press freedom. In 1994, the government began limiting press freedoms. Government refused to create the Conseil de L'Information designated by the Constitution, which was supposed to be a non-government organization or bureau, but instead created their own Conseil Supérieur de L'Information, which is not independent - there is no separation of powers. In 1997 the government banned all free radio discussion of social problems. The Conseil Supérieur de L'Information controls the press, radio, TV, journals and newspapers. Last month [April] was the first time the government banned social exposés. (Harman Snow)

Zongo was equally outspoken on corruption and the abuse of human rights. In the same interview, he points to the fear with which the Compaoré regime controlled Burkina Faso: “Compaoré won the first presidential elections in 1992. He was the only candidate. People refused to be candidates because they feared retribution, because two or three people were murdered in the road” (Harman-Snow). As Loro Mazono remarks in *Hommage au journaliste Norbert Zongo* ‘Tribute to the journalist Norbert Zongo’, “Les lecteurs de *L'Indépendant* ne doutait point de la ligne éditoriale de ton journal: engagement, combat, fidélité! Et comme quelqu'un d'assermenté, tu ne faillis pas à ta mission” ‘Readers of *The Independent* had no doubt as to your newspaper’s editorial line: commitment, struggle, loyalty. And as though sworn to it, you did not fail in your mission’ (12).

On 13 December 1998, Norbert Zongo, his younger brother Ernest Zongo, his driver Ablassé Nikiéma, and one of his employees Blaise Ilboudo, were killed in an apparent car-bombing, although it later emerged that Zongo had sustained bullet wounds before his body

was burned. Just a few days before his death, Zongo had written an article anticipating the threat to his life:

Supposons aujourd'hui que l'Indépendant arrête définitivement de paraître pour une raison ou une autre (la mort de son directeur, son emprisonnement, l'interdiction définitive de paraître, etc.). Nous demeurons convaincu que le problème David restera posé et que tôt ou tard il faudra le résoudre. Tôt ou tard !

Imagine today that The Independent ceased publication for one reason or another (the death of its editor, his imprisonment, a ban, etc.) We remain convinced that the David question remains outstanding and that sooner or later it must be resolved.

*(L'Indépendant, 8 December 1998).*

Zongo's killing was found by a Presidential Commission to have been politically motivated, triggered by his journalistic investigation into the killing of David Ouédraogo by the President's younger brother François Compaoré. In December 1997, François Compaoré had alleged that his driver David Ouédraogo had stolen money from him and had handed him over to the military. Ouédraogo was reportedly tortured to death, and his body was never found. François Compaoré was due to be charged with murder, but he failed to answer a court summons. Zongo had denounced this breach of justice. The situation reminded him of the death and torture of Guillaume Sessouma, a professor kidnapped from his home in 1990, and of the disappearance of a student, Dabo Boukary, in the same year.

Although the commission identified five members of Burkina's presidential guards as having been implicated in Zongo's killing, only one of them was ever charged and the charges against him were subsequently dropped. Efforts by Zongo's family and their lawyers to seek accountability were repeatedly frustrated as the case was reassigned to different prosecutors and judges, and the fees paid by the family for processing the case were returned. In 2011, Zongo's widow instructed lawyers to take her fight for justice to the African Court,

who decided that these events constituted a cover-up that violated the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. It found the government in violation of the Revised Treaty of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which requires it not only to protect freedom of expression, but also the vocation of journalism. On 16 December 1998, an estimated 20,000 people joined the cortege to accompany Zongo to his final resting place in Ouagadougou.

### THE BURKINABÈ DICTATOR-NOVEL

The killing of Norbert Zongo was not a single and isolated assassination, but characterised a certain political culture, and was thus perceived as the starting-point for an organised and widely mobilised socio-political struggle against impunity (Hagberg 31). However, I will argue that the fight against impunity had its roots in Zongo's outspoken journalism, as well as in his fictional work.

Norbert Zongo's *Le Parachutage*, Patrick Ilboudo's *Les Vertiges du trône* and Loro Mazono's *Massa Djembéfolá* respond in different ways to the culture of impunity about which Zongo was so outspoken, but they share certain thematic, formal and narrative conventions that identify them as dictator-novels, with authoritarian leaders of fictionalised regimes positioned as their protagonists. The novels are characterised to varying degrees by their experimentation with form, style, narrative structure and language, representing the development from realism towards the mythic and symbolic representations of power that Ute Fendler traces in her study of political power in the Burkinabè novel (90). Reading these texts as dictator-novels invites us to focus on the novels' self-conscious attention to their status as literary texts, drawing into question the role of fiction and its relationship to reality.

The fictional President Gouama's first person narration in Zongo's *Le Parachutage*, portrays the dictator's creation of a world of meanings through which he reinforces his

position--and his performance--of power. In "Necropolitics", Achille Mbembe observes that the postcolony can be read as a space in which conventional ideas of sovereignty that view power as embedded within the nation state no longer apply, but where self-interested actors of this kind often hide "behind the mask of the state" (2003: 35). In *Le Parachutage*, the mask of the state becomes visible, as Gouama and his regime manipulate the mass media and propaganda to project an heroic, idealized image that fuses together the leader and the state to the extent that the fate of the regime and the ruler become one. Gouama replaces unionists with loyal militants, guarantees the fidelity of government ministers with large payments, and ensures compliance with the regime through vigilant surveillance, but key to his survival is the support of the French government. Gouama's regime is propped up by the French in the form of the advisor Marcel, who helped the president in guiding the country during the early days of independence, and has become his most trusted associate.

Meanwhile, in Ilboudo's *Les Vertiges du trône*, sovereign power lies firmly in the hands of President Benoît Wédraogo of the Republic of Togo, a composite of many former leaders of Burkina Faso. Wédraogo sees himself as the father of the people, a patriarch, even a monarch. Any opposition is repressed and his special forces, under the leadership of Ting Bougoum, eliminate those who are perceived to pose a threat. Ilboudo points directly to the transparency of the President's performance of power: "Le Président Benoît Wédraogo, qui a entamé une carrière de dictateur sans se rendre compte, confond parfaitement la politique et le théâtre" 'President Benoit Wedraogo, who embarked on his career as a dictator without reflection, perfectly combines politics and theatre' (78). Wédraogo's dictatorship is all-controlling, with the media and printed press at the service of the regime. The only independent newspaper, *Le Républicain*, is destroyed by government supporters in one of a series of events that triggers the uprising that will bring an end to his regime. The minister

charged with keeping the President informed fails to do so, strikes and uprisings become increasingly common and the President rules in ignorance of the growing anger of the people:

L'ordre présidentiel, c'est la soumission aveugle du peuple à ses volontés et l'acharnement à traquer et à abattre les révolutionnaires, fauteurs inguérissables de troubles sociaux. La confiance, c'est l'adhésion irréfléchie de tous aux actes que le Président initie. En somme, son peuple doit se placer sous sa garde sans rechigner.

To the President, order is the blind submission of the people to his wishes including the brutal repression of revolutionaries, who to him are incurable sources of social disruption. Confidence means uncritical adherence to all of the acts that the President initiates. In sum, his people must place themselves in his care without protest. (78)

In his isolation, detached from reality and obsessed with power, Wédraogo believes that he is leading the country wisely and that the people are happy, despite the recent student demonstrations.

Loro Mazono's *Massa Djembéfola ou le dictateur et le djembé* also portrays a blindly power-obsessed ruler, Bomassa. Having come to power on the eve of independence, he has led the nation of Torodougou for over forty years. His rule is absolute and there is no room for criticism. Indeed, such is the control of Bomassa over his advisors that their role has become obsolete. Corruption defines the regime. Torodougou must rely heavily on financial support from France, "le pays du Camembert" 'the land of Camembert' and the USA, "le pays du Dollar" 'the land of the dollar', in part because of the leader's self-indulgent investment in grand projects that include a palace and expansive zoological gardens, but also because of the draining of public funds by the corruption of his advisors. With the workers demanding the payment of salaries, Bomassa is forced to beg for funds from France.

Bomassa's regime is also defined by its violence. Comparing the regime to that of Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea, Borofata observes that:

Sékou Touré a été un tyran au vrai sens du terme. L'histoire raconte que de 1965 à 1984, il a détruit environ trente mille vies dans le Camp Boiro. [...] De ce point de vue, Bomassa est égal à Sékou Touré, selon les historiens. Tous deux ont trois religions : le trône, le culte de la personnalité, la nuisance. Si Sékou Touré a eu le génie de Mal en créant le Camp Boiro, Bomassa, lui, a créé Barakouta et Sandakaradja.

Sékou Touré was a tyrant in the sense of the term. History tells us that from 1965 to 1984, he took around thirty thousand lives in Camp Boiro. [...] From this point of view, Bomassa is Sékou Touré's equal, according to the historians. Both have three religions: the throne, the cult of personality, and violence. If Sekou Touré worked evil in creating Camp Boiro, Bomassa created Barakouta and Sandakaradja. (98)

Borofata stands in opposition to the regime with his friend Akiri, who shares the same ideals of peaceful opposition, and because they and their families have both been targets of its impunity.

## REGIMES OF IMPUNITY

Mazono points directly to the impunity that characterises Bomassa's regime as Akiri expresses the pain of losing his son Denfa. He was just twenty five years old when he had participated in a public demonstration to demand freedom and equality and was killed by the regime. Another example is revealed when Bomassa comes under threat from the opposition and his thoughts revert to a previous incident:

Un jour il avait sommé ses sbires de commettre un forfait. Ces derniers, par un temps obscur, munis de leurs engins blindés, devaient accomplir une macabre mission: percuter le véhicule de Sira (aimable et brillant libre penseur) et faire

parler la poudre, sans laisser d'indice. Celui-ci faisait preuve d'une indépendance d'esprit très poussée et il était très critique à l'endroit du trône.

One day he had summoned his henchmen to commit a misdeed. They were to accomplish a macabre mission using their armoured vehicles under cover of darkness: to ram the vehicle of Sira (a brilliant and likeable free thinker) and open fire, covering their tracks. This man had demonstrated strong independence of spirit and was very critical of the regime. (67)

The people of Torodougou live in constant fear for their lives, under threat of arbitrary arrests, violence and killings. When Tata's husband leaves the house, she worries that he will be targeted by the regime, and indeed his car is later burned out as a warning that he has overstepped the mark. Other enemies of the regime are disposed of, as in the case of the opposition members who are drowned in the Barakouta river, bundled alive into sacks weighted down with rocks and the tops tied before they are thrown into the river.

Strikingly, in both Zongo's *Le Parachutage* and Ilboudo's *Les Vertiges du trône* the impunity of the regime is represented by the death of a parachutist, which symbolically portends the fall of the government. In Ilboudo's novel the dictator commands the people to celebrate the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, because "tout homme à Bogya a deux patries: la France et Bogya. Donc, le 14 juillet, c'est aussi la fête de Bogya" 'everyone in Bogya has two homelands: France and Bogya. So the 14<sup>th</sup> of July is also a celebration in Bogya' (87). The celebrations culminate in a parachute jump over a packed stadium that results in the death of Captain Zizien Traboulga: "Ils l'ont tué, en public et en direct, chuchote un spectateur" 'They've killed him, in public and live on air, whispers a spectator' (108). The death of Traboulga is a tipping point and the people of Titao take to the streets to put an end to the dictatorship, much as the people of Burkina Faso responded to the death of Norbert Zongo. The President has not anticipated the protest and he watches on in shock as events unfold: "De son palais, le

Président suit la scène avec des jumelles. Il est écoeuré par le petit peuple qui conteste son autorité, lui qui est habitué à être acclamé ou adulé au passage par des foules hilares” ‘From his palace, the President follows the unfolding scene with his binoculars. He is wounded by the masses contesting his authority, he who is used to being adored and worshipped by the cheering masses’ (54).

The setting for the parachute jump in Zongo’s *Le Parachutage* is the culmination of the celebrations of President Gouama’s return from overseas. Gouama is convinced that he is about to be deposed by a communist-inspired plot organised by officers from his own army. The event is directed by Commandant Keita, described as “la gloire et la fierté de l’armée” ‘the pride and glory of our army’ (44). The jump is relayed to the people of Watinbow by the radio announcer from the mobile radio unit, who describes how the first paratroopers jump, land, and gather up their parachutes before an announcement is made to the crowds that Commandants Keita and Ouédraogo will be jumping too:

Ces deux vétérans de la 2<sup>e</sup> Guerre mondiale, de l’Indochine et de l’Algérie vont nous faire une démonstration de leurs talents. [...] Du haut de la tribune, le Guide de la Nation suit le parachutage. La main droite en parasol sur le front, il scrute le ciel. Sans doute veut-il aussi contempler les exploits de nos seigneurs du parachute. [...] Les deux points se précisent. Ce qu’on pensait être des oiseaux ne sont que nos deux héros. [...] C’est incroyable, c’est épouvantable, c’est catastrophique! Les parachutes ne se sont pas ouverts. Quelle horreur, quelle horreur, c’est incroyable, mon Dieu quelle perte, quel désastre.

These two veterans of the Second World War, of the wars in Vietnam and Algeria, will now give us a demonstration of their talents. [...] From high on the platform, our Nation’s Guide is watching the parachute drop. His right hand holds an umbrella to block the sun while he gazes up into the sky. It is clear that he is also

keen to witness the exploits of our parachuting heroes [...] The two specks become more visible. They seem more like birds than the two heroes we know them to be. [...] It's incredible, catastrophic! The parachutes have not opened! It's horrible, it's absolutely horrible! It's incredible! Oh my God! What a loss, what a disaster. (45)

The perpetrators are revealed when Gouama meets with his Advisor, Marcel, who explains that he and the Ambassador will take no risks when it comes to the personal security of the ruler: "Quand votre pouvoir est menacé nous n'hésitons pas." 'We will not hesitate to act when your power is threatened' (46). However, even Marcel's concern for the security of the ruler emerges as a pretence, as it later emerges that the parachute jump is a cover for the coup that is so greatly feared by Gouama.

#### AESTHETICS OF RESISTANCE

Ngugi wa Thiongo's endorsement of Christopher Wise's English translation of Zongo's *Le Parachutage*, published as *The Parachute Drop* in 2004, points to the role of the writer in resisting the abuse of power. Ngugi describes *Le Parachutage* as "both a story of the ugliness of postcolonial misrule and also the beauty of resistance. The ugliness embodied in a neo-colonial dictatorship leads to the author's end, but the resistance lives after him to continue the challenge and affirm the resilience of the human spirit" (Back cover). That resistance is expressed not only in the thematic focus of Zongo, Ilboudo and Mazono's novels, but in the ways in which they point to the transparency of the dictator's performance of power through the narrative strategies they adopt.

In *Le Parachutage*, Zongo's critique of the regime operates first and foremost at the level of language, as he underlines what Wise describes as the poverty of political discourse and the language used to both valorize and vilify Africa's leaders: "Zongo will not even deign to narrate the fake political crises of the novel; instead he lets the obnoxious

mouthpieces of Watinbow's media falsify what is already false to begin with, badly staged events waxed over by an even more fraudulent abuse of language" (viii). The failed parachute jump and the military coup are conveyed to the people by radio, despite those responsible for the coup revealing the spuriousness of these transmitted words in their discussions behind the scenes. A conversation between the coup makers Corporal Karfo and Captain Onana reveals their intention to adopt the language of the left, pay lip-service to liberation movements around the world, and name responsible union leaders to the most important government posts, but all the while they will focus on restructuring the entire army. When Gouama is toppled, his world of meanings is replicated and embellished by the new regime. "Le Grand stratège, le timonier-national, le Guide Suprême" 'the Great Architect, National Representative, the Supreme Guide' (37) is simply replaced by General Kodio, "Sauveur du peuple, le Libérateur, le messie que Dieu envoya" 'the Saviour of the People, the Liberator, the Messiah sent by God (37). The overthrowing and killing of the leader by one of his closest collaborators at the end of the novel echoes the end of Sankara's rule and his replacement by Compaoré, repeating the pattern of Burkinabè political life since independence. The circularity of the narrative suggests that the new regime will simply replicate the preceding one. As Wise remarks, "The revolting way in which Gouama is first celebrated and then torn down, only to be replaced by another 'Beloved Leader and Guide' overwhelms the reader with a nauseating regularity" (viii).

Likewise, the key events in Ilboudo's *Les Vertiges du trône* are reported by the media, some reflecting actual events in Burkinabè history. The announcement of the imminent birth of President Wédraogo's child and the playing of the child's first cry on the radio is a fictional representation of the airing of the first cry of one of Maurice Yameogo's children on air that can be found in the National Archives (Sanou 172). The media's falsification of events creates a world of instability for the people of the Republic of Titao, who struggle to

make their opposition to the regime heard. However, the omniscient voice of the narrator in *Les Vertiges du Trône* is removed from the action and, as such, he is able, as Ute Fendler puts it, ‘to take the reader by the hand [and] show him/her the real nature of politics’ without fear of the consequences (95). Shifts in setting and perspective also provide readers with glimpses of different aspects of the government and its consequences on the lives of the people of Titao, providing a sense of their different experiences of the predictably repetitive rule of the dictatorship.

Ilboudo foregrounds unlikely voices to critique the regime of President Wédraogo, including that of the madman Gom Naba, who is presented as the voice of reason. Gom Naba is considered insane by many around him, but he is a master of words who sees things clearly. He says of himself: “Je suis un menteur qui dit la vérité” ‘I am a liar who tells the truth’ (p. 49). Pointing to the importance of the figure of the madman in African literature, Jacques Chévrier remarks that “C’est en effet à ce personnage singulier [...] que revient le rôle prophétique de voyant et d’avertisseur à l’égard de ses contemporains, incapables de démêler le sens des événements qu’ils vivent” ‘It is to this singular character [...] that falls the prophetic role of soothsayer and auger to his contemporaries, who are incapable of making sense of events’ (365). Indeed, Gom Naba is the only character who sees the first student uprising not as an isolated incident, but as having greater significance, and a counterpoint to the discourse of regime. As Salaka Sanou remarks, Gom Naba is the ideal voice of reason for, after all, “who would dare to publicly insult a dictator, if not a madman?” (147).

By giving a voice to many different characters in *Massa Djembéfola, ou le dictateur et le djembe*, who each offer their own perspective on the regime and its effects on their daily lives, Loro Mazono also provides an effective counter to the monovocality of Bomassa’s authoritarian regime in which the only voice expected to be heard is that of the ruler.

Challenging the head of the armed forces, Djon I, who insists that the Sandakaradja and Barakouta affairs in which opponents of the regime were drowned are mere fictions, Borofata reminds him that these events amount to genocide, prompting the revelation to the reader of the soldier's involvement in the killings, which has deeply traumatised him. However, the reality is that Bomassa is a terrible speaker who can never give a persuasive speech in public, but instead stumbles over sentences, desperately looking for the right words. When Bomassa and Borofata go head to head in elections, Borofata speaks to the people in French as well as in their national language, convincing them of the need for change, while the regime falls back on their usual strategy. By contrast, Bomassa resorts to thin rhetoric:

Votez pour l'envoyé de Dieu Bomassa !

Bomassa c'est la lanterne

Qui éclaire tout Torodougou

Qui donne la joie de vivre

Qui donne le sourire

A ceux qui l'ont perdu.

Vote for God's representative Bomassa!

Bomassa is the lantern

That lights all Torodougou

That brings happiness

That brings a smile

To those who have lost it. (105)

The contrast reveals the hollowness of the performance of power by Bomassa and his reliance on a carefully constructed cult of personality. When the speeches fail to convince, the regime resorts first to restarting building projects, building schools and improving the infrastructure, and then, when that fails to convince the people, hands out "des kilogrammes de billets

d'argent" 'kilos of bank notes' (223). Unlike Zongo's *Le Parachutage* and Ilboudo's *Les vertiges du trône*, Mazono's novel ends with the overthrowing of Bomassa's regime after forty-two years of rule, and the hope of more democratic future under Borofata.

## **THE STRUGGLE FOR ACCOUNTABILITY**

While the novels of Zongo, Mazono and Ilboudo reveal the culture of impunity that defined Compaoré's regime by playing with the boundary between aesthetics and politics on a thematic as well as a formal level to provide a critique of authoritarian rule, they do not stand alone. Rather, they must be read as part of the more widespread, and continued, fight for accountability in Burkina Faso.

The days that followed Zongo's death gave rise to a protest movement that came to be known as *Trop c'est trop* (Enough is enough). As Hagberg remarks, the protests expressed the frustration of the people of Burkina Faso with the culture of impunity that permitted those in power to act illegally and without punishment (222). People took the streets to protest and for almost two years, citizens and civil society unleashed their anger against the political mismanagement of the regime, and the economic and social inequality, high unemployment, police violence and impunity that characterised Burkina Faso under Compaoré. Some demonstrations were particularly violent, targeting symbols of authority. Social conflicts broke out in virtually every economic sector, and women, children, young people, public and private sector workers and retirees demonstrated their solidarity (Chouli 263).

Intellectuals and academics responded to Zongo's death with the publication of the *Manifeste pour la liberté* published in January 1999, instigated by three academics from the University of Ouagadougou. Signed by 250 Burkinabè intellectuals, the publication of the manifesto was conceived as the founding statement of "un mouvement qui oppose un refus catégorique à la violence, à l'impunité, à la violation des libertés et qui fait de la défense des

valeurs universelles, des principes fondamentaux donnant un sens à la vie des hommes sa constante préoccupation” ‘a movement that categorically refuses violence, impunity, the violation of liberties and that makes its ongoing concern the defence of universal values and the fundamental principles that give meaning to the life’ (Loada 140). In the twenty years since Zongo’s death, there has been a marked increase in radical opposition and popular protest action aimed at the government and institutions of Burkina Faso. As Chouli remarks, ‘On the local scale, the people are increasingly able to impose their authority by superimposing their own agenda on that of the political authorities’ (269).

While Compaoré clung on to power, he was forced to demonstrate his legitimacy in the face of numerous critics and focused on improving the democratic façade of the Burkina Faso. Compaoré rapidly made a number of popular institutional reforms, the regime held regular multiparty elections and allowed parliament to function (Hilgers 355). He took a lead role in the face of the 2011 Ivoirian crisis, which conveyed a positive image of a strong leader internationally, and Burkina Faso also hosted numerous international politics, sport and cultural events to promote an image of a democratic country. The independent press was also permitted to grow, a figurehead of which remained *L’Indépendant*, directed by G enevi ve Zongo, the widow of Norbert Zongo.

Compaor ’s strategy appeared to have worked when, on 13 November 2005, six years after Zongo’s murder, he was re-elected as president for the third time in a row, with 80% of the vote. This “paradoxical plebiscite” (Loada 242) can best be explained, Hilgers contends, by the ruling party’s powerful clientelistic machinery, the president’s newfound popularity and the opposition’s state-sponsored weakness (355). Compaor ’s twenty-seven year reign eventually came to an end on 31 October 2014. He resigned the presidency and fled to C te d’Ivoire following violent popular protests over his attempt to change the constitution so that he could run for a fifth consecutive term. Scrutiny by international organisations,

international and local civil society groups aims to prevent the same culture of impunity being permitted in the new Burkina Faso under the rule of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, who came to power in 2015.

## CONCLUSION

In his Foreword to *Unmasking the African Dictator: Essays on Postcolonial African Literature*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o traces the emergence of the African dictator-novel, describing how:

The dawn of independence was followed by dwindling hope. The colonial had turned into the neo-colonial. In general African fiction was able to dramatize the end of an illusion. Fiction became the voice of democratic reason. But the new regime responded by shutting all avenues of democratic dissent. [...] One party states soon mutated into one person rule that in turn mutated into full-fledged dictatorship which, in its practices, combined the tragic, the comic, and the absurd. This as once best described by Daniel Moi of Kenya when he publicly called on his ministers and politicians never to ask questions – theirs was to do exactly what he told them to do: put a comma or a full stop or an exclamation mark only when he told them to do so. Specifically, he called upon them to behave like parrots. To the ears of the dictator in general, parrotry became poetry. Slowly, fiction began to capture this combination of the tragic, the comic, and the absurd. African dictator fiction was born. (ii)

As Ngugi recognises, historical fact and literary fiction intersect in the genre of the dictator-novel. Yet, while it is productive to link dictator-novels to the political realities they evoke and critique, they also invite a re-examination of the relationship between politics and aesthetics in postcolonial criticism.<sup>2</sup> Lydie Moudileno remarks that there is no denying that the period following independence gave rise to a harsh re-evaluation of the achievements of

decolonisation and of the new African states' leadership among novelists (22). It is likewise true, she observes, that all fiction in so far as it proposes a certain vision of society, is inseparable from the realities that inspire it (22-23). The correspondence of the literary text to reality should not be assumed. As Cécile Bishop argues in *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship* 'a deeper awareness of the relationship between aesthetics and politics--which on some levels fail to coincide, and on others, intersect in complex ways--should be central to the practice of criticism' (5).

In retrospect, Zongo's death can be understood as having been a catalyst for Burkina Faso that gave people the opportunity to convert their political resentment into political action (Hilgers 360). *L'Indépendant* was a relatively small newspaper with a limited readership, and Ouédraogo asks, "How can the disappearances of a simple journalist, editor of a small weekly, with hardly 15 000 copies, in a country of 85% illiterates, raise such an excitement?" (1999). Norbert Zongo represented more than the content of his articles and his literary fiction. As Hagberg remarks, "For many people, he came to symbolise the courage to speak out and tell truth, a virtue celebrated in principle, but much more rarely translated into practice" (Hagberg 246). As this article has demonstrated, that shared political resentment found its early expression in Zongo's journalism for *L'Indépendant* and in his novel *Le Parachutage*, but also in the later novels of his contemporaries Loro Mazono and Patrick Ilboudo.

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