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2006

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On December 13, 1998, the Burkinabè writer Norbert Zongo and three traveling companions, Abdoulaye Ablassé Nikiema, Yembi Ernest Zongo (Norbert's younger brother), and Blaise Ilboudou, were brutally murdered by six members of the Presidential Guard of Blaise Compaoré, or the RSP [Régiment de la sécurité présidentielle] in Burkina Faso. The Compaoré government at first dismissed this event as a "tragic accident," but under mounting public pressure agreed to the appointment of an independent commission to investigate the crime. The Commission d'enquête indépendante (CEI) verified the involvement of the Presidential Guard, as well as the premeditated and savage nature of the crime. Additionally, the CEI concluded that Zongo had been pressured to cease his investigative reporting of the murder of David Ouédraogo, who was tortured to death by the RSP. Ouédraogo had been the chauffeur of François Compaoré, Blaise Compaoré's younger brother. However, Zongo was also Blaise Compaoré's most prominent critic in Burkina Faso. In his weekly journal *L'Indépendant*, Zongo criticized the fiscal abuses, extra-judicial actions, and human rights violations that have characterized Compaoré's rule. The killing of Zongo and his three companions appalled millions not only because Zongo symbolized the moral conscience of an entire nation, but also because Zongo's killers, who were all members of the Presidential Guard, vengefully incinerated his corpse, after they'd already riddled him with machine gun fire. The message to everyone was clear: Compaoré didn't just want Zongo dead, he wanted to set an example for all Burkinabè writers.

The drama between Norbert Zongo and Blaise Compaoré could have been scripted by Zongo himself, even before Compaoré's coup against Thomas Sankara. In retrospect, Zongo's novels *Le Parachutage* and *Rougebéinga*, published in 1988 and 1990, seem prophetic commentaries on the Compaoré regime, long before its bloody beginnings. Though their settings differ, both novels are variants upon the same theme: the power-intoxicated dictator who ruthlessly exploits his people for personal gain. In *Le Parachutage*, Zongo sets

his novel in contemporary West Africa whereas *Rougebèinga* offers us an image of a precolonial African kingdom, ruled by Naba Liguidy (or "King Money"). In both novels, the traditional and contemporary rulers perpetuate the old cycles of cruelty, murder, economic exploitation and destabilization, out of the basest forms of self-interest and greed, while the African peasantry pays the highest price for such abuses in this dearth of ethical leadership.

If Zongo equally condemned French colonial rule, during which untold numbers of Voltanic people experienced horrible sufferings in the name of "progress" (i.e. roads built, medical facilities established, etc.), his more urgent target was the corrupt African leadership of today. Zongo often wrote about the problems posed by neo-colonizing agencies like the IMF and the World Bank. He wrote about structural adjustment programs that inflicted yet more needless sufferings upon the Burkinabè peoples. He also wrote about the on-going legacies of French imperialism, the recurrent economic crises of devaluation, crushing foreign debt-loads, and other irritations from the north. In spite of these urgent problems, Zongo insisted that one overriding social ill must first be addressed: the problem of ethically corrupt leadership. "Our drama consists not merely in the fact that our national leaders do not behave responsibly out of fear for their personal lives," Zongo wrote. "The fact is that they daily become more and more irresponsible. This is the true source of our troubles, as our people die and civil wars continue to ravage our continent."¹

Like Sankara, Zongo believed that Africa's leaders must themselves lead impeccable lives in the spheres of the private and the public. "If a leader hopes to impose his moral vision upon others," Zongo insisted, "he must himself be able to recognize the difference between right and wrong, between mistakes and crimes. Above all, he must not commit such crimes himself."² As Zongo saw it, President Blaise Compaoré fell woefully short of these standards, as well as the deeper standards of traditional Sahelian society. In fact, it would be difficult to find a more profoundly ethical culture than that of the Mossi people, who make up the majority of the Burkinabè, as well as that of the sixty some ethnic groups that peacefully co-habit the territory of the former Upper Volta with the Mossi. Here, I emphasize the Mossi because of their unique geographical location in central Burkina Faso (Ouagadougou was also the capital of the Mossi empire), which plays a decisive, if not dominating, factor in contemporary Burkinabè politics.

The high ethical standards of Sahelian peoples are in part the result of harsh climatic conditions. In a land where survival itself is never certain from season to season, one's very life often becomes dependent upon the good will and fair dealings of one's neighbor. Centuries of unbroken cultural traditions have produced a wealth of customs, rituals, and aphorisms all upholding the highest standards of moral integrity. If the upheavals of modernization have

caused a loss of equilibrium during the last century, not to mention the effects of European imperialism, the deeper foundations of Sahelian society remain unaffected; or, as the Mossi poet Titinga Pacéré has put it, "The tamarind seed may fall upon the earth, but its good taste will remain forever."³ Zongo himself believed that the corrupt leaders of recent history would eventually be judged and found wanting by a tribunal far more stern than the flimsy ethics implied by Jacques Chirac's notion of "bon gouvernement."

On the title page of *Rougebéinga*, which was published three years after Compaoré's rise to power, Zongo cites a Turkish proverb that aptly sums up his novel's theme: "*When the sharpened ax slashes through the forest, the trees say to one another, 'The ax-handle comes from us.'*"⁴ As Zongo saw it, Compaoré was that ax-handle for Western neo-colonizing powers, who had become increasingly alarmed at the prospect of a "Sahelian Cuba." It would be inaccurate to describe Zongo as a disciple of Thomas Sankara, whom Zongo also criticized in his turn. In fact, Zongo and Sankara both distrusted leadership cults of any nature. When Burkinabè supporters of Sankara once broke into a chant, "Thomas Sankara may he forever be president," Sankara scolded them, saying, "When you're president, you're president. When you're not, you're not. We must be clear, this is not a good song."⁵ Unlike Sankara, however, Zongo's identity as a writer was not inextricably bound up in Marxist-Leninist ideology but was shaped by his commitments to free-speech, democracy, and "truth-telling." Zongo did not take sides by adopting easy slogans or party politics (from left or right); instead, he spoke the unspeakable and wrote the "facts" as he saw them. His distrust of Compaoré began on October 15, 1987, largely because of the dishonest and violent nature of Compaoré's assumption of power. Whatever Sankara may have stood for, the more damning fact in Zongo's eyes was that Compaoré had become president through extrajudicial means. In doing so, he had shown a deplorable disregard for Burkina Faso's constitution, which would become the defining pattern of his leadership. In his weekly column, Zongo repeatedly sought to show that Compaoré's disregard for due legal process was symptomatic of his deeper contempt for the Burkinabè people.

The first lie—Compaoré's claim that he was "out of the loop" because of malaria when Sankara was murdered—was followed by even greater lies. Due to Sankara's popularity, Compaoré could not simply claim that he was not throwing out the entire revolutionary experiment but was merely "rectifying" it, putting it back on the "right track." The new government celebrated its assumption of power by proclaiming "Rectification Day," but the process of distancing itself from Sankara's more radical, "Maoist" policies began almost immediately. Government leaders were no longer compelled to wear plain peasant boubous, nor to drive more modest vehicles, live in simple houses, etc. Compaoré, who married the "daughter"

of the deceased Ivoirian dictator Felix Houphouët-Boigny, seemed to have taken lessons from his legendary father-in-law. The appearance of government leaders in fancy clothes, driven about Ouagadougou in their private limousines, and living in elaborate mansions, all marked the growing corruption in Burkina Faso's government, wrongly heralded in the West as part of Burkina's "democratization" process. This was a misconception that Compaoré would milk for years. Côte d'Ivoire, France's flagship colony with a long history of reliance upon cheap Burkinabè labor, now became the new model state under Compaoré's rule. The *ménage à trois* of Côte d'Ivoire, France, and a weak Burkina Faso (once threatened by Sankara's alliance with Jerry Rawlings of Ghana) was rekindled as Sankara's "rhetoric" about an autonomous and independent Burkina Faso receded from popular memory.

Meanwhile, Burkina's ever-patient citizenry watched these developments and whispered that Sankara could not have been killed without the green-light from Paris. Except for Norbert Zongo, few dared publish the thoughts and words of the Burkinabè people. Despite his commitments to free speech, even Zongo was deeply apprehensive about publishing such whisperings from fear of possible civil war. "It is not the destabilization of Compaoré's regime that is worrisome," Zongo told his readers. "It is rather the disastrous consequences that could be visited upon our people. Quite frankly, we are worried ... The catastrophe is just beginning."⁶ Zongo repeatedly warned that Burkina's political system faced almost certain implosion, and thus more misery for a people already poor beyond belief. The fault line that would set off the disaster had first developed during the early days of Compaoré's coup against Sankara. "There are two camps within the Military Council," Zongo wrote, "and they are not newly formed ones ... So far we have been lucky in escaping the consequences of October 15, 1987. If there had been a counterstrike that day [by the allies of President Sankara], things would have been very grave for Ouagadougou and its inhabitants."⁷ If the government and the military maintained an obstinate silence about this lethal division, the people of Ouagadougou waited for the Sankarists to strike back. "[The Burkinabè] know there is far too much rancor that has been swept under the rug," Zongo wrote, "too many frustrated murders and unrequited vendettas."⁸

Following Zongo's assassination, Burkinabè students requested Zongo's family to bury his body alongside that of Thomas Sankara. In street folklore, particularly among students too young to have actually lived through the revolution, Zongo and Sankara were described as martyrs who died for identical causes. One leaflet that circulated at Zongo's funeral read, "*Norbert Zongo is dead, but there will always be more Norberts, just as there will always be more Sankaras: those who dare to speak the truth to the Burkinabè and African peoples.*" But Zongo himself, despite his dislike of Compaoré, pleaded with both factions

to open dialogue with one another. The pro-Sankarist students were therefore as mistaken as Compaoré's most fanatical supporters, who also believed Zongo spoke on behalf of the Sankarists. In fact, Zongo urged these separate camps to "lance every boil" and communicate with one another. "The problem of the Military Council remains unarticulated and therefore unresolved," Zongo wrote. "The deeper we move into this crisis, which some say doesn't even exist, the more we sense the grave danger that hangs over our country."⁹

Zongo maintained that the problem ran much deeper than the ouster or survival of Blaise Compaoré. In fact, the military overthrow of Compaoré might prove equally disastrous for the Burkinabè people. The Sankarists, the heirs of perhaps the only real Fanonist revolution in African history, would seek due vengeance against Blaise Compaoré's neo-imperialist reign. It would be a "righteous" war in their eyes, but waged against a nearly unbeatable foe: the staunch ally of France and recipient of World Bank funding (earned for his "progressive" economic policies which had first brought structural adjustments and "privatization" to Burkina Faso). Unlike Sankara loyalists, Zongo worried that a more familiar scenario would unfold, as yet another "strong man" rose to power by taking on Compaoré in his turn. Zongo knew very well that the fall of Blaise Compaoré at the hands of the Sankarists would not signal an end to Burkina's miseries. There could be no end to these miseries until the Burkinabè people had the chance to democratically work through their problems without fear of violent repercussions. In doing so, Zongo insisted, they would have to stay at all times within the perimeters of the legal system and national constitution, as originally framed before Compaoré's tinkering. Zongo put his faith in an open democratic process, not in party dogma or petty vengeance. He implored Burkina's leaders from the military, religious organizations, unions, the traditional elders and chiefs, etc. to help him begin such a dialogue to heal the nation. Though he was warned by many that it was "sheer madness" to get involved in these problems, Zongo responded that "openly discussing these matters [was] no where near so dangerous as a potential confrontation between these opposing clans, which might unleash a civil war."¹⁰ No matter which side won, Zongo maintained, such a civil war would spell disaster for everyone: "If you forget everything else I've written," he wrote, "remember this one lesson: We must fight against dictatorship among our people because not a single person will escape its misery. No one!"¹¹

In early 1997, Zongo remained optimistic that a compromise might be reached. He was troubled, however, by the way the Compaoré regime had "locked itself up from the inside," adopting ever more drastic measures to preserve its power. Each extreme action, including more disappearances, illegal detentions, and the *faux complôt* of October 1996,¹² did not for Zongo

demonstrate Compaoré's strength but his weakness. They were signs of his crumbling power. To prevent further extreme measures, Zongo appealed to Compaoré and his followers to strike a bargain with the Sankarists, allowing dialogue to take the place of yet more violence. The assassination of Norbert Zongo, which could not have occurred without Blaise Compaoré's foreknowledge, was not therefore a blow against a mere political rival, or against the "Sankarist" opposition in Burkina Faso: It was, in fact, a cynical statement against the possibilities inherent in the democratic process.

Whatever slight hope Zongo held out for a peaceful solution to this dilemma, his optimism was tempered by his belief that Compaoré had already gone too far down the path of violence. With chilling lucidity, Zongo detailed future miseries that almost certainly lay in store for the Burkinabè people. Following Compaoré's pilgrimage to the Vatican in the mid-1990s, some Burkinabè wondered if true reform might be on the horizon, if Compaoré would honor his mythical "vow" to John Paul II to desist from the use of violence. Zongo remained more realistic. In his weekly journal, he wrote:

We hear it said, *"Things have changed! President Compaoré will stop killing people!"* [Compaoré's] recent trip to the Vatican supposedly confirmed his intention to banish violence from his politics. But ... make no mistake: Compaoré will kill again.... President Compaoré knows that he is crushing his people and that there will be consequences. How can he possibly honor his vow not to kill anymore? How can he possibly stop the nightly abductions, the detentions, the tortures? How can he not continue to transform his people into sheep, ready for the slaughter? How can he refrain from imposing his will upon Burkina's intellectuals, who know very well what he's doing? Who understand the wider dimensions of his dictatorship, and what it means for our people? Only one solution is possible for him: to imprison, to kill, to cause disappearances, etc. There is no other alternative. There has never been a partial dictatorship!... Our esteemed president is fully prepared to commit more violence which will soon leave us with more widows and more orphans by the dozens. Neither the pope, nor the cardinals, much less our local priests, can prevent this from happening. When a single man appoints himself dictator of an entire people, he will not bother to listen to anyone other than himself. President Compaoré has made his choice. He is total.¹³

In one of Zongo's more eerily prophetic moments, he cites the aphorism, *The luckiest people under a dictatorship are the first ones to be executed. They at least enjoy the benefit of tombstones and tears.* Zongo adds: "In the end, there's little time to erect a dignified memorial with the names of all the dead, much less to mourn the dead with our tears."¹⁴

In the meantime, the foreign press glibly congratulated Burkina Faso for its attainment of "the highest levels of democracy," parroting the baldest clichés from Compaoré's press releases and TV transmissions, especially at FESPACO (the Pan-African film festival based at Ouagadougou). For Anglophone visitors at FESPACO 1997, for instance, the only English language book available on Burkina Faso was a translation of *Blaise Compaoré: Realism and Integrity* (1991), written by a young Gaullist and pro-Compaoré toady named Jean R. Guion.¹⁵ Here, French Ambassador Stéphane Hessel, in his "Preface" for Guion's book, refers to Compaoré as a leader "in love with justice"¹⁶, a sentiment echoed by Guion who refers to Compaoré as "handsome Blaise"¹⁷, a leader who "hates privilege and nepotism."¹⁸ In February 1997, Zongo could only watch this "democratic" celebration in disgust, as he mulled over two more urgent developments: first, Compaoré's amendment of the Burkinabè constitution in January 1997, which removed presidential term limits enabling him to rule for life; and second, the worst student strike in history at the University of Ouagadougou.¹⁹ In regard to the latter, Compaoré's methods of resolving the situation, which was originally instigated by the fact that a popular student-body president had been tortured to death by the Compaoré regime, had so far included the distribution of 9mm pistols among street-thugs to disrupt student gatherings, the illegal detention and torture of student leaders, the use of tear-gas and rubber bullets, and other extreme measures to insure student protesters could not disrupt FESPACO. Exasperated by the increasing absurdity of these measures, Zongo wrote: "What kind of politics is this? It doesn't take much intelligence to grasp that you don't resolve a political crisis, like the recent strike at the university, by arming common street thugs in hopes that they'll disrupt student meetings!"²⁰ While the gullible foreign press praised Burkina for its "democratic" achievements, Zongo recounted for his readers the story of the heron who borrows the finery of his friends to attend the festival. In this "Burkinabè fable" the heron decks himself out in false attire, but those who loaned him their feathers one-by-one take back their gifts to the heron's final humiliation. "When the party is in full swing," Zongo warned, "the heron will at last stand naked before the eyes of the entire world, a hideous spectacle of brutality and cruelty."²¹

As Zongo insisted, the old cycles of brutality and despotism will not be overcome in Burkina Faso until free and open dialogue takes the place of

unrestrained political terror. Following Norbert Zongo's assassination, a Burkinabè delegation named MBDHP [Mouvement burkinabè pour les droits de l'homme et des peuples] presented Compaoré with a list of over one hundred names of people who have been assassinated since the original "rectification day" back in 1987. Prominent on this list are the names of university professors and students, including Umarou Clement, Sessouma Guillame, and Dabo Boukary, all of whom had dared to speak out against the Compaoré regime. In France, media accounts of Zongo's assassination have focused upon his investigation as a journalist into the torture and death of David Ouédraogo, the chauffeur of François Compaoré (and younger brother of Blaise Compaoré whom Zongo referred to in his articles as the "petit président"). Both Zongo and Ouédraogo were indeed murdered by Compaoré's presidential guard [RSP, or Régiment de la sécurité présidentielle], most likely under the direction of François Compaoré, as the CEI [Commission d'enquête indépendante] recently confirmed. But Zongo's actual death was preordained long before December 13, 1998. Before his murder, Zongo had already lived through four separate assassination attempts, as well as numerous illegal arrests and detentions. Zongo knew that the price for free speech was high, and he was fully prepared to pay that price. "The greatest and truest courage," Zongo wrote, "consists in speaking what comes from the heart, and defending it."²² His words will remain a lasting indictment of the Compaoré regime, but they will also point the way to a better future for those who will heed them.

Notes

1. Henri Segbo [or "H.S.," a penname for Norbert Zongo]. *L'Indépendant* N. 270 1998: 2.
2. H.S. "Mobutuization" *L'Indépendant* N. 193 1997: 2.
3. Titinga Frédéric Pacéré. "Saglego: or, Drum Poem (For The Sahel)." Trans. C. Wise in C. Wise ed., *The Desert Shore: Literatures of the Sabel*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001.
4. Norbert Zongo. *Roughéinga*. Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso: Les éditions, 1990.
5. Thomas Sankara. *Thomas Sankara Speaks*. New York: Pathfinder, 1988: 175.
6. H.S. "Déstabilisation." *L'Indépendant* N. 186 1997: 5.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 3.
8. *Ibidem*, p. 3.
9. *Ibidem*, p. 4.
10. *Ibidem*, pp. 3-4.
11. H.S. "Requiem!" *L'Indépendant* N. 183 1997: 2.

12. See Ernest Harsch. "Burkina Faso in the Winds of Liberalisation." *Review of African Political Economy* N. 78 1998: 625-41.
13. H.S. "Requiem!" *L'Indépendant* N. 183 1997 : 2.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 2.
15. For instance, on the assassination of Sankara, Guion writes, "Nobody will ever be able to clarify the mystery of that tragic day. What is known is that Blaise Compaoré, confined to his bed by a strong attack of malaria learned only later what had really happened . . . Once the death of Sankara had been established, a new Head in Burkina was required. So it was that Captain Compaoré was quite naturally pushed into the forefront without his having really wanted the position. But did he have any choice? He was obviously the best person to put the Revolution back on the rails." Jean R. Guion. *Blaise Compaoré: Realism and Integrity*. Paris: Berger-Levrault International, 1991: 58-59
16. *Ibidem*, pp. 5-6.
17. *Ibidem*, p. 90.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 93.
19. See Christopher Wise. "Chronicle of a Student Strike in Africa: The Case of Burkina Faso, 1996-1997." *African Studies Review*, 41: 2 (1998): 19-36.
20. H.S. "Déstabilisation." *L'Indépendant* N. 186 1997: 3.
21. H.S. "Le Héron." *L'Indépendant* N. 186 1997: 2.
22. H.S. "Déstabilisation." *L'Indépendant* N. 186 1997: 5