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Burkina Faso: Emerging literature and artistic creation – cultural identity through literature and the arts

Located in the heart of West Africa, Burkina Faso covers a surface area of 274 000 km². It shares borders with Mali in the north and west, Niger in the east, Benin, Ghana, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire in the south. Burkina Faso is a landlocked Sahelian country with a relatively flat landscape characterized by plains, plateaux, and rocky slopes. Its climate is tropical with two seasons: a dry period (November through April) marked by the harmattan (dry wind) and a rainy season (May through October) with an average rainfall of 900 mm. The southern part receives more rain than anywhere else in the country, while the northern region is the driest and is characterized by severe desertification.

The vegetation reflects the geographic discrepancies of the country: wooded and tree savannah in the east, west and south, and thorn trees in the north. Humans and animals contribute to the degradation of the landscape through bushfire, uncontrolled woodcutting, extensive agricultural and livestock farming. Indeed, Burkina Faso is principally an agricultural country; its main productions are cereal for its own consumption and some cash crops like cotton (main export product), sesame, and other oleaginous products.

Demographically, Burkina Faso hosts about 12 million inhabitants, with a density of 21 inhabitants per square km. It comprises about sixty different ethnic groups unequally distributed across the country:

- Gulmchémas (4.5%) in the east;
- Gurunsis (5.3%) in the south;
- Nomadic populations including Fulanis, Dogons, Bellas, Kurumbas, etc. (10.4%) in the north;
- A heterogeneous group including Bobos and Bwabas (6.7%), Senoufos (5.5%), Gouins, Turkas, Toussians, etc., in the west;
- The Lobi group, comprising Lobis, Djans, Dagaris, Birifors, Gans, etc., in the south-west;
- The most important ethnic group, Mosses (more than 50%) in the central part of the country.



Each of these ethnic groups has its own language. However, three languages are dominant and are therefore spoken all over the country: Mooré, Diula, and Fulfulde.

On the religious plane, three main religions prevail in Burkina Faso: animism, involving more than 56% of the population, Islam (33%), and Christianity (10.5%).

The Burkinabè population is mobile and boasts a rich cultural heritage, making Burkina Faso a cultural centre (crossroads) with numerous traditional as well as modern cultural and artistic events. The most popular ones internationally are *Festival panafricain du cinéma et de la télévision de Ouagadougou* (Fespaco, Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou), which takes place on the last week of February every odd year, *Semaine nationale de la culture* (SNC, National Culture Week), occurring on the last week of March every even year, and *Salon International de l'artisanat de Ouagadougou* (SIAO, International Handicraft Show of Ouagadougou), taking place on the last week of October, every even year. Besides these institutionalized events, various other regional festivals are organized with the aim of valorising and popular-

izing the local and regional cultural heritage. These concern traditional artistic practices like masks and dancing (for instance, the Warba dance festival of Zorgho in the Ganzourgou province, the International Mask Festival (FESTIMA) of Dédougou in the Mouhoun province (North-West), the Mask Festival of Pouni in the Sanguié province, and the Archers Festival of Gaoua in the province of Poni, etc.

Many other activities contribute to promote this heritage, for instance the theatre festivals regularly taking place in the different performance centres of the country. The most known of these are:

- The international theatre for development festival (FITD) organized by Atelier Théâtre Burkinabè, a theatre company directed by Prosper Kompaoré;
- The international theatre and puppet festival of Ouagadougou (FITMO) managed by Jean-Pierre Guingané;
- The theatre creation meeting (RECREATALES) by Etienne Minougou;
- The atypical nights of Koudougou (NAK) by Koudbi Koala, etc.

These festivals offer artists tribunes to express their creativity and reveal Burkina Faso's artistic wealth to the international public.

On the literary plane, Burkina Faso is an emerging country. Its literary institution is budding. Since the 1980s, Burkinabè literature has been flourishing, especially through:

- Literary competitions organized regularly, and with remarkable impact on artists' productivity; for instance the *Grand Prix National des Arts et des Lettres* (National Arts and Literary Grand Award), the *Grand Prix Littéraire du Président du Faso* (the President's Literary Grand Award), etc.
- International prizes won by Burkinabè writers: Frédéric Titinga Pacéré, Patrick Gomdaogo Ilboudo, Bernadette Dao, etc.;
- The international book fair of Ouagadougou organized annually since 2000, and representing an important moment for writers, editors, critics, and the public;
- Organization of the cultural administration, with the creation of a book and literary promotion department and a national library;
- Introduction of Burkinabè literature in school curricula, supported by a strong interest of researchers for it.

Burkina Faso's literature belongs to African national literatures, which in turn are part of emerging literatures. The concept of emerging literature is relatively recent in African literary studies. It came about to reflect the state of literary production. As former colonies, each African country aspires to an autonomous literary existence, and therefore endeavours to create favourable conditions for literary creation. The process hinges on the level of development of each country and requires the State to

be the primary patron of the arts. In so doing, the State helps writers to play their own role in the process of political, economic, and cultural autonomy, which each of the new States legitimately aims to achieve. This is why national literatures are considered as participating in the process of national identity building, with some fundamental characteristics.

In the first instance national literatures may be considered as a claim coming from researchers and writers concerned with conferring a literary identity on their country, and securing a place for it on the African literary scene. This is also part of what we may call a patriotic fight, intellectual nationalism. The arguments for this form of claim are more political and judicial than literary: it seeks to put forth the existence of a national territory with a flag, a national identity card, a passport, etc. Though its justification may be devoid of any aesthetic dimension, the fact remains that it is an interesting research and investigation avenue in the nation-states born of colonization. I believe indeed that the constitutions of the nations after colonization are a multi-component process, including literature. While it still uses the colonizer's language (now a national language because it is the official language imposed on all), literature may participate in the building of a national consciousness. It may boost this development, especially if it thematizes the history common to all the social categories of the country. It is under such conditions that we may understand how a national literature can be the object of a claim, either to draw attention to an important fact, or as a process triggered by a consciousness at work.

The next form of expression of the concept of national literature is epistemological; and it concerns African literary criticism as a science capable of clarifying literature. The literature of the turn of century is fragmented; it is in rupture from the tradition established since colonization. In the face of this fragmentation and dispersion,¹ it became necessary for literary criticism to adopt new modes of operation: no longer can a globalizing approach involving the entire continent account for this literature. The impression is that African literature is no more, and has given way to specific literatures peculiar to each country; and it is now up to each individual State to take responsibility for its literature. Literature, we all agree, is a creative act, taking place in a historical context. This is, it seems, what the new critical approach is underscoring: the need to take into account the new context, which entails, not a panoramic but a focalized perspective; one that deeply scrutinizes literature within its environment.

Now the operation mode mentioned above means that studying African literature holistically is now outdated because this cannot lead to a profound investigation, and it is bound to use discriminatory criteria. For instance, how can one study space or tradition in the African novel without selecting a specific corpus? Determining a corpus implies choosing specific novels out of the long list of novels published so far. It entails eliminating hundreds of others and this means acknowledging, albeit im-

Explicitly, one's inability to take into consideration all published African novels. One might respond that even without that obstacle, it is still necessary to have a corpus if one means to do serious work. However, here the discrimination involved is of an aesthetic range. I am raising an epistemological issue: how does one organize science, knowledge, in such a manner that it clarifies reality as a whole? This is why beyond all political and ideological considerations, the issue of national literatures must be perceived as a scientific issue. Refusing this dimension would lead to reducing it to a judicial issue.

For emerging literatures, building a literary institution requires taking into account the important issue of publishing. In Burkina Faso, this concern has been discussed at encounters organized by both the cultural administration and the University of Ouagadougou.

In 1985, the authorities and representatives of thirty provinces, cultural administration officers, learned and cultural minded personages were convened at a seminar. Following a deep situation analysis, the participants to the seminar observed that Burkinabè literature was fully expanding and that it was necessary to support this development. Another seminar held in 1993 took the idea further, especially through examining the theme of youth literature and acknowledging the contribution of the literary competitions organized as part of the National Grand Award for the Arts and Letters to the emergence of Burkinabè national literature.²

Besides seminars, which are administrative by nature, colloquiums, with a more scientific dimension, have discussed the issue of publishing. In 1988, the Department of Modern Literature of the University of Ouagadougou organized its first international colloquium. This colloquium reached the conclusions that public authorities needed to motivate Burkinabè writers, promote the policy of literary competition, encourage the creation of a publishing house as well as the organization of writers into a mutual help association, and sensitize economic operators to lend more interest to patronage vis-à-vis the field of letters. In 1993 another colloquium organized by linguists of the University of Ouagadougou recommended considering national language literary production, as part of a national linguistic policy.

By implementing all these measures and recommendations, the Burkinabè government has been able to play a crucial role in the literary publishing undertaking. For a better understanding of the State's intervention, it is proper to consider, institutionally and in terms of production, the particular achievements which have helped to boost Burkinabè literature internationally.

Institutionally, it is noteworthy that in 1986 a separate Ministry of Culture came into existence for the first time ever. The minister was a young female teacher of French, who is also a writer and winner of the National Grand Award of the same year. In creating a separate ministry, the political authorities made history, and their move was at the same time an institutional recognition: recognition of the existence

of literary agents who are thus granted trust to the point of being given ministerial responsibility. Indeed, Mrs. Bernadette Sanou (who had no record in politics) became known to the general public only in 1986 through winning the National Literary Grand Award (GPNAL). The recognition is thus double: the need of a separate ministry of culture more than a quarter of century after the country's independence, and the need to give literary agents responsibility as full members of the social fabric.

In terms of production, it is notable that Burkinabè writers are remarkably represented on the African literary scene. Titinga Frédéric Pacéré and Patrick Gomdaogo Ilboudo won the *Grand Prix Littéraire de l'Afrique Noire* (Black African Literary Grand Award) respectively in 1982 and 1992, and in 1985 Moussa Théophile Sowié was awarded the *Prix du Concours théâtral interafricain* (Interafrican Drama Competition Prize). This international acknowledgement comes on top of the numerous awards at the national level and clearly indicates that not only is Burkinabè literature taking shape, but it is also showing quality and merit. For writers, this was more than encouraging, especially as it was taking place along stimulating frames such as the *Grand Prix National des Arts et des Lettres* (established since 1983 and which has fostered the rise of young authors), and the *Grand Prix Littéraire du Président du Faso* (the President's Literary Grand Award) instituted in 1993.³

The quantity of Burkinabè literary production testifies to the writers' fecundity: beginning in the 1980s, that literature has experienced a prodigious growth to which the different literary competitions, including the *Grand Prix National des Arts et Lettres*, have largely contributed. These have been a source of reassurance and encouragement for writers in their creative endeavour. Organized by the public administration, the competitions offered the State an opportunity to patronage the arts and culture.

The Burkinabè literary institution is in a building process: its actors and their respective roles are clearly identifiable. However, this is not enough because an aspirant writer deserves to be better known, especially in the context of Burkina Faso where literature faces difficulties in its growth process.

Literary criticism and the university through colloquiums and seminars have supported the development of Burkinabè literary production. This has led to the development of a reception policy. A number of books have been dedicated to this literature, among which Salaka Sanou's *La littérature burkinabè. L'histoire, les hommes, les œuvres* ("Burkinabè Literature. Its History, Actors, and Productions", 2000); Louis Millogo's *Nazi Boni, premier écrivain du Burkina Faso* ("Nazi Boni, the First Burkinabè Writer", 2002) and Marie-Ange Somdah's (ed.) *Ecritures du Burkina Faso* ("Literary writing from Burkina Faso", 2003). The publication of this special issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* (University of Pretoria, South Africa) on Burkina Faso, entitled: *Burkina Faso: Emerging Literature and Artistic Creation. Cultural Identity through Literature and the Arts*, is part of this reflection momentum on Burkinabè Literature. Co-ordinated and edited by Amadou Bissiri, Salaka Sanou (from the UFR/LAC of the University of

Ouagadougou) and Hein Willems (from the Department of Afrikaans at the University of Pretoria) this is articulated around three central themes: oral literature, written literature and the arts.

The growth of this literary production was also made possible by the richness of Burkinabè cultural heritage, a source of inspiration for writers. Indeed, Burkinabè writers employ creative forms and techniques borrowed from oral tradition, thus contributing to lend their productions a certain and remarkable peculiarity. With such a cultural panorama, it is easy to understand why a special issue dedicated to Burkina Faso cannot be limited to written literary production. Of necessity, it has to take into consideration the reality of oral literature. I have been saying that Burkina Faso has a rich culture. This special issue could not do without addressing the other fields of artistic expressions where Burkina Faso is also emerging. This has led us to consider articles dealing with the following themes: written literature, oral literature, and cultural manifestations.

Concerning written literature, five contributions examine the novel from different perspectives. K. Somé and A. Sissao look at novel writing as a process and analyse aspects borrowed from oral literature, which is a source of authenticity for the Burkinabè novel – authenticity based on the use of old narrative traditions by modern writers. A. Bissiri looks at Jean-Pierre Guingané's dramatic production used as a means of social communication whereby the dramatist and theatre director tries to participate in the social emancipation of rural and urban populations. Poetry is the concern of A. Kaboré and G. Sawadogo who both examine the best-known Burkinabè poet, Titinga Frédéric Pacéré, creator of the concept of *bendrologie*.⁴ Kaboré shows the pertinence of Pacéré's approach to African literatures, which are at once written and oral. On the other hand, Sawadogo looks at Pacéré's contribution to the emergence of Burkinabè literature.

Using a comparative approach, S. Sanou examines the operation of literature and the mask: he argues that if the literary institution has been definitely consecrated by criticism, the mask may also be considered as an institution, not just for its society of origin, but also for researchers.

L. Yoda considers the issue of literary translation in a multilingual context, based on the case of a Burkinabè novel: in the light of the multilingualism obtaining in Burkina Faso and the translation practice commonly used, Yoda wonders if literary communication reflects the particular linguistic context of Burkina Faso.

Two papers have been devoted to oral literature: First, A. S. Kam proposes a new classification approach to the different literary genres usually studied under oral literature. Building on existing theories in the area, he re-examines oral genres in the African context by focusing on such aspects as time, place, context of dissemination of oral texts, etc. On his side, A. Ouédraogo looks at the renewed interest for folktales based on the experience of the Burkinabè national television, which has launched a

new series of programmes dedicated to oral storytelling. This is an initiative by one of the ministers of Moogho Naaba, and it aims to revitalize the practice of oral storytelling in a modern context while making it “popular”.

Some contributors investigate the arts, especially artistic expressions: B. E. de M'Berli conducts a semiological study of the female body in two films by Burkinabè filmmaker Gaston Jean-Marie Kaboré. He bases his analysis on the principle of “intermediality” in film writing and according to which a film is a transfer of signs here carried by the body of African women. J. C. Ky bases his paper on the place of plastic artists in the *Semaine Nationale de la Culture* and wonders whether this event has truly helped the artists to develop fully. He also investigates the conditions of their participation in the competition for the *Grand Prix National des Arts et des Lettres*. R. Rousseau looks at other frames of expression for plastic artists outside artistic competitions. He describes different institutions available for artists to develop their potentials, both national private and public institutions established as part of bilateral cooperation.

This special issue ends with a paper by L. Millogo on the language of Burkinabè masks, which he considers as esoteric. Especially, he underscores their secretive dimension, both in terms of their philosophy and various expressions.

The different contributions to the present issue offer an opportunity for discovery and further knowledge of Burkina Faso through a study of its artists' creativity, both in terms of literature and artistic expressions. They offer an insight into Burkina Faso's emergence onto the African literary scene.

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Translated by Amadou Bissiri

Notes

1. This dispersion, which some would call balkanization, was “constitutionalized” by the Organization of the African Unity in 1963.
2. Created in 1983, this prize is awarded every two years as part of the National Culture Week.
3. For more information on literary competitions in Burkina Faso, see Salaka Sanou's “La philosophie des concours littéraires au Burkina Faso” (The underlying philosophy of literary competitions in Burkina Faso” in *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 41(1): 65-81.
4. The English equivalent of this would be “drumology” but this was the concern of an Ivorian dramatist, Niangoran Bouah. Bouah and Pacéré defended different theses [transl.].