



Memory making, memory marketing: Mobile films, social media, and popular struggle in Burkina Faso

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance in Burkina Faso as “critical events,” in the sense of the term as suggested by Veena Das (1995), to explore the interaction between street level struggle and social media activism. More specifically, I seek to understand the way in which images and video-clips shared online became vehicles of political change in Burkina Faso. The images and video-clips shared online by the Burkinabe people soon came to constitute grassroots representations of the “new Burkina Faso.” Once the days of the revolt were over, DVDs and CDs with video-clips and images were copied, multiplied, and sold by petty vendors in the streets of Ouagadougou, alongside more professional productions documenting this particular period of Burkinabe history. Taken together, I argue that such a documentation was part of memory making and, by extension, memory marketing of the 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance, and furthermore articulated the political legacy of the late President Thomas Sankara. In this vein, the critical events of the 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance changed the manner in which politics was practiced, while being inscribed in the *longue durée* of Burkinabe popular struggle.

Keywords: Burkina Faso, political anthropology, street protest, social media, revolution

Introduction

On 30-31 October 2014, a popular insurrection ousted Burkina Faso’s president Blaise Compaoré from power. This insurrection – at the time referred to as “a revolution” (Hagberg et al. 2015; Sangaré and Vink 2015) – was a major democratic breakthrough in a country hitherto characterised by a semi-authoritarian regime (Hilgers and Mazzocchi 2010) or a double-façade democracy (Hagberg 2010). After 27 years in office, President Compaoré had finally crossed his Rubicon when he decided to modify the Constitution, so that he could stand for a new term, and, in practice, enjoy a lifetime presidency. Faced with such a blatantly autocratic attempt to monopolise power, the Burkinabe people rose up and said no to the president and his regime after a massive mobilisation of civil society organisations, labour unions, opposition parties, as well as ordinary citizens who felt that “enough is enough.” A few weeks after the fall of Compaoré, a one-year political transition was agreed upon so as to prepare for democratic elections in the country. Retired diplomat Michel Kafando was appointed Transition President, and in turn, he appointed Lieutenant Colonel Isaac Yacouba Zida, the second-in-command of the notorious Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle (RSP), as Prime Minister.

In September 2015 however, just a few weeks away from the planned elections, a coup d'état took place. The RSP coupists took the president, the prime minister, and the government hostage. The coup was condemned by most Burkinabe, civil society organisations, trade unions, and political parties, as well as by the international community. Once again, the Burkinabe people rose up and mobilised against this autocratic attempt. Resistance mounted in Ouagadougou and elsewhere in the country, and just a few days later, it became perceptively clear that the coup would fail. The regular army sided with the Burkinabe people, and troops started to move towards the capital. Many feared a military confrontation, but the regular army initiated negotiations with the coupists. After intense nightly negotiations, an agreement was reached that included the disarming of the RSP. The Burkinabe resistance had paid off.

In this article, I examine the 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance as “critical events,” in the sense of the term as suggested by Veena Das (1995). According to Das, critical events are those events that have instituted new forms of action which have redefined traditional social and political categories. Critical events mark a change in the manner in which politics is practiced. My take on critical events is to explore the interaction between street level struggle and social media activism. More specifically, I seek to understand the way in which images and video-clips shared online became vehicles of political change in Burkina Faso. Images and video-clips shared online by the Burkinabe people soon came to constitute grassroots representations of the “new Burkina Faso” where “nothing shall be as before” (Hagberg et al. 2015, 2018). And once the days of the revolt were over – the insurrection lasted just a few days, say, no more than four days (Hagberg et al. 2015), and the resistance against the coup itself lasted only for a week (Hagberg 2015) – DVDs and CDs with video-clips and images were copied, multiplied, and sold by petty vendors in the streets of Ouagadougou. At the same time, more professional productions of Semfilms and their Ciné Droit Libre, as well as freelancing photographers also documented this particular period of Burkinabe history.¹ Taken together, such a documentation was part of memory making and, by extension, memory marketing of the 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance. Furthermore, these critical events articulated the political legacy of the late President Thomas Sankara who was killed in 1987, in the coup that brought Compaoré to power. In this vein, these critical events of the 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance changed the manner in which politics was practiced, while being inscribed in the *longue durée* of Burkinabe popular struggle.

Beyond the specific case of Burkina Faso, I also discuss the relationship between popular struggle and social media, which has become very important in contemporary history, especially since the so-called Arab Spring in 2011 (Bayat 2015; Honwana 2013). Today any political protest against the powerholders is simultaneously orchestrated on social media. Donald Trump's tweets are just one extreme example of how politics is articulated in parallel – in the streets, as it were – and on social media (Hart 2020). The implication of Facebook in the Brexit referendum in the UK is another example (Hall 2022). And Russia's war in Ukraine is certainly being fought both on the battlefield as well as on social media. That said, social media activism and street level struggle have become so intrinsically interwoven that

¹ The film “Une révolution africaine : les dix jours qui ont fait chuter Blaise Compaoré” is a masterpiece in its own genre. It describes protesters and activists in the midst of struggle of the Burkinabe October revolution 2014. The film is a joint venture by the Collectif Ciné Droit Libre TV (Sangaré and Vink 2015).

we have hard time figuring out what is going on, how, and where. Protesters share images and video-clips, comments, and battle cries on social media that are in turn integrated into the struggle. Combatants' fighting spirits are galvanised by photos and films taken by young protesters and instantly shared on social media. With great bravery and commitment, the young protesters take the initiative to express their yearning for a different future, both in the streets and on social media (e.g., Bayat 2018; Hagberg et al. 2015; Honwana 2013; Kirwin et al. 2022).

This article seeks to understand how the interaction between street level political protests and social media activism impacted the political actions in Burkina Faso in 2014–15. Even though the distinction between street level and social media protests is blurred due to many street activists simultaneously being online activists, it is my contention that social media activism cannot replace street level politics. Furthermore, the article aims to contribute to the growing scholarship on the anthropology of revolution. Following the Arab Spring and the subsequent worldwide upheavals in its aftermath, “a small but growing number of anthropologists” began to systematically focus on “political revolutions as cultural processes” (Thomassen 2018: 160). Anthropological accounts of revolution and protests parallel some empirically grounded qualitative research in political sciences (Bayart et al. 2008; Mueller 2018; Siméant 2014). Throughout the article, I analyse the use and abuse of images and video-clips as a way to understand the 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance in Burkina Faso, not only as political, but also as cultural processes. I relate these critical events to the legacy of former President Thomas Sankara (1983–1987), notably the flourishing Sankarism. More recently, the Sankarist legacy was clearly articulated in the September 2022 coup perpetrated by Captain Ibrahim Traoré.

Methodologically, the article builds on my long-term research engagement² with the interplay between political culture and radical change, so as to produce comparative ethnographic knowledge about power and politics as practiced in different societies and countries (Hagberg 2019b, 2021). The article is first and foremost based on ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation in the streets of Ouagadougou. Moreover, I did online participant observation as the critical events unfolded, combined with informal interviews with colleagues and friends in Burkina Faso, and I also carried out fieldwork³ together with a team of Burkinabe colleagues, in the weeks following the 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance (Hagberg et al. 2018).

In this article, I publish images referred to in the analysis, and this requires ethical considerations.⁴ Even though anonymised, I have chosen to publish some images of dead bodies, because these images are available, well-known, and more importantly, played a crucial role. It was when images like these were spread on social media that the struggle reached a point of no return. As shocking and as disturbing as they are, these images were so central to the 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance that I have chosen to reproduce them here. In a sense, their publication in this article may well be part of memory making.

² Since 1988, I have been conducting research in Burkina Faso, totalling more than 8 years of ethnographic fieldwork.

³ My analysis is furthermore based on collaborative research carried out with Ludovic Kibora, Adjara Konkobo, Siaka Gnessi, Sidi Barry, and Firmin Nana.

⁴ Some photos were taken by unknown protesters who instantly published them on Facebook, while others were taken by me. One photo was taken by professional photographer Paul Kabré in Bobo-Dioulasso.

The article is organised as follows. In the next section, I describe what I conceptualise as two critical events – the 2014 popular insurrection and the 2015 resistance – in some detail, as they both articulate some essential facets of the prevalent political culture in Burkina Faso. In the third section, I narrate how images and video-clips were used in the heat of popular struggles. The fourth section focuses on the marketing of memories, that is, how a street market of images, posters, and films emerged, and were soon shaping the manner in which people were referring to the critical events. In the fifth section, I broaden the perspective to look into the upsurge of attempts to document the Burkinabe social and political transformations; locally produced books, homemade video-clips, and engaged researchers (including myself) trying to contribute to the understanding of memory making of recent struggles. To conclude, I argue that the cross-fertilisation of mobile firms, social media, and popular struggle all considered together, narrates a particular story of contemporary socio-political transformations in Burkina Faso. While the critical events analysed here were unfolding in the streets of Ouagadougou, they were simultaneously occurring online, by way of comments, images, and video-clips. It was in the streets however, that people got wounded and killed, and where people were immediately exposed to the violence of the security forces (RSP).⁵

Insurrection and resistance in Burkinabe political culture

The 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance have to be situated in the larger context of Burkinabe political history and political culture, as they are aligned to past struggles for radical political change, for instance, the uprising against President Maurice Yaméogo on 3 January 1966, or the Democratic and Popular Revolution led by President Thomas Sankara between 1983–1987, or the human rights movements against impunity in the wake of the assassination of journalist Norbert Zongo in 1998, or the 2011 army mutinies (Hagberg et al. 2015). The timeline of revolts and uprisings shows the continuity of the efforts, and even though the Burkinabe people display tremendous endurance and resilience against power abuse, they arrive at a moment when “enough is enough” (Hagberg 2002; Harsch 2017). For a long time, Compaoré’s presidency seemed to be the exception, as he succeeded in staying at the helm of power for 27 years, but his regime came to an end after the 2014 insurrection.

Captain Blaise Compaoré came to power in a bloody coup d’état on 15 October 1987 in which President Thomas Sankara was killed. The assassination of Sankara and his 12 companions is today epitomised as a turning point. Sankara was a charismatic revolutionary leader who embodied integrity and dignity.⁶ He cleaned up the country, as it were, and gave the country a new name, and, even more importantly, gave it pride and respect. He successfully combatted widespread corruption and punished bad governance. In doing so however, he also made enemies. In one of his speeches, Sankara said: “You can kill Sankara today, but tomorrow thousands of other Sankaras will be born.”⁷ Today, the popularity of Sankara is massive among the Burkinabe youth; he has become a role model for the African youth more generally, because in contrast to many presidents, he was a leader not

⁵ While many activists were simultaneously in the street and online, social media activists and observers were definitely less exposed to the violence of security forces.

⁶ There is a body of scholarly work on Sankara and his legacy (e.g., Harsch 2014; Peterson 2021; Somé 1990). The publication of Thomas Sankara’s speeches are also published on a regular basis (e.g., Sankara 2008).

⁷ “Tuez Sankara aujourd’hui, demain naîtront des milliers d’autres Sankara.”

serving himself but his people. Therefore, the 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance are integrated into the public memory making and memory marketing of the late Thomas Sankara, including the building of a Memorial at the very site where he and his comrades were assassinated.

After a few years of severe and bloody political repression and violence (assassinations, tortures, extra-judicial jailing, etc.), Compaoré initiated a process of democratisation in 1990 to end the long period of the state of emergency in the country (Otayek et al. 1996), and the following year a new Constitution was adopted. Compaoré was elected in 1991, 1998, 2005, and 2010, always receiving an overwhelming majority in the first round. Yet, even though the paragraph 37 of the 1991 Constitution defined a limit of two seven-year terms for the president, totalling 14 years in office, the Constitution was first modified in 1997, waiving the two terms limitation so as to allow Compaoré to continue as president. In 2001, the Constitution was modified once again due to massive popular protests after the assassination of Journalist Norbert Zongo (Hagberg 2002; Santiso and Loada 2003); the president's duration in office was then limited to two five-year terms, totalling 10 years. Despite the new constitutional change of 2001, Compaoré did present himself as "a new candidate" in 2005 (Hilgers and Mazzocchi 2010; Hagberg 2010). According to the provisions of the law, he was thus able to run for a new term, renewable once. In 2010, he obtained 80 per cent of the votes in the first round. According to the Constitution, this would be Compaoré's last term. And yet much political debate over the next two years that followed, focused on whether the president would manoeuvre to be able to stay in power (Hagberg et al. 2018: 21; Hilgers and Loada 2013). One such attempt was to create a second chamber – a Senate – to pave the way for Compaoré's regime to stay on, but popular protests made the president stop the process despite the fact that all senators had already been appointed (Hagberg et al. 2015). Hence, the political opposition mobilised against life presidency, including brandishing the red card against a new term for Compaoré during a mass meeting at the National Football Stadium in May 2014 (Hagberg et al. 2018). Furthermore, civil society revived itself with the creation of organisations like the Balai Citoyen, and the Front de résistance citoyenne, etc. (Degorce and Palo 2018; Hagberg et al. 2018). And finally in January 2014, a major challenge to Compaoré's power materialised when three of his closest collaborators – Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, Salifou Diallo and Simon Compaoré⁸ – left the Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (CDP) to create the Mouvement du Peuple pour la Progrès (MPP).

On 21 October 2014, the Burkinabe government finally decided to send a Bill to the National Assembly to modify the Constitution so that Compaoré would be allowed to run for a new term. At the same time, the Bill would definitely lock paragraph 37 of the Constitution for further modifications. Accordingly, Compaoré would be allowed to stay on for another term, while the Bill would simultaneously block against such a situation occurring in the future. For most people however, this meant in practice a life presidency for Compaoré, considering the regime's track-record of modifying the Constitution. Once the government's decision was announced, mobilisation and protests spread like wildfire in

⁸ MPP's president, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, had been Prime Minister and president of the National Assembly; its 1st vice-president, Salifou Diallo, had been Secretary of State to the Presidency before being promoted to Minister of Agriculture; and its 2nd vice-president, Simon Compaoré, was the Mayor of Ouagadougou from 1995 to 2012.

the country. On 27 October, several thousand women took to the streets of Ouagadougou to march against the proposed constitutional changes; they went out with spatulas and broomsticks demanding Compaoré to step down. The next day on 28 October, a record-high turnout was witnessed when hundreds of thousands of protesters – some even claim the figure was one million people – took to the streets to protest against the Bill (Hagberg et al. 2015).

On 30 October, when the Bill was to be voted by the National Assembly, Ouagadougou was filled with protesters. At a given moment⁹, the protesters succeeded in entering the courtyard of the National Assembly. They soon sacked, looted, and set the building on fire. The Burkinabe national television was attacked as well as the residences of key powerholders of the Compaoré regime (Hagberg et al. 2015, 2018). Once the popular uprising was launched, the regime made attempts to seek compromises: first, the government announced that the Bill had been withdrawn; second, the public was informed that the government and the National Assembly had been dissolved in the hours following the attack on the National Assembly; and third, in a TV speech to the Nation on the same evening, Compaoré promised to step down by the end of 2015. Despite these attempts, protesters demanded the immediate resignation of the president. On 31 October around 12 o'clock, Compaoré finally resigned after an ultimatum had been pressed by protesters who had gathered in front of the HQ of Chief of Defense Staff in central Ouagadougou, where negotiations between senior army officers and a number of civil society leaders were ongoing (Hagberg et al. 2015: 211). Instantaneously, there was a void in power as it were, and the army assumed power to avoid further looting and to control the volatility of the revolt and the overall situation.

For a few weeks, a military transitional government led by Lieutenant Colonel Isaac Yacouba Zida of the RSP (Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle) was in charge. It was later replaced by a civilian-military transition regime, because the country's "social and political forces" (*les forces vives de la Nation*), except those belonging to Compaoré's party CDP, had quickly negotiated a one-year political transition to prepare democratic elections and pave the way for a "new Burkina Faso." Three weeks after the popular insurrection on 30-31 October 2014, a Collegium put in place by *les forces vives de la Nation* appointed retired diplomat – Michel Kafando – as Transition President. Once formally installed, Kafando in turn appointed Isaac Yacouba Zida, who had been *de facto* Head of State for the three-week military transition, as Prime Minister. Initially, Zida was seen as "the man of the RSP" in the Transition Regime. In December 2014, however, he publicly declared that justice would be sought for all victims of the Compaoré regime, many of whom had been killed by RSP soldiers (Hagberg 2002; Hagberg et al. 2018; Frère 2010; Chouli 2015). In other words, the second-in-command of RSP had aligned himself with the Burkinabe people's claims for truth and justice. Yet the RSP troops did not accept this new wave of revolutionary change from their former commander. Over the course of the following year, RSP troops provoked "troubles" several times – a euphemism for essentially trying to capture and maybe even kill the prime minister – before they finally perpetrated a coup d'état.

The September 2015 coup aimed to stop the democratic process launched since the fall of Compaoré. The coup d'état however, failed. Once again, the Burkinabe people stood up against these "phantoms of the past," as one civil society leader put it. After a week of

⁹ Protesters had attacked from different sides and at around 9:20 in the morning they finally succeeded in entering the National Assembly, when the police had to focus on saving MPs from the excited mob (Hagberg et al. 2015: 209-210).

grassroots struggle, civil disobedience, and popular resistance, the RSP coupists finally gave up when the regular army supported the cause of the Burkinabe people and threatened to attack the RSP with heavy artillery (Hagberg 2015). The popular resistance was key to turning the situation against the coupists, despite attempts of international actors, notably the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), to strike a compromise with the coupists (Saidou 2018).

In the remainder of the article, I explore the use and abuse of smartphone images and homemade video-clips in these critical events of Burkina Faso in 2014-2015.

Images and video-clips in revolution and resistance

The social media explosion that we have experienced in the last decade blurs the boundaries and contours of familiar conceptions of the world, especially key social, spatial, and temporal distinctions such as “us”/“them,” “here”/“there,” “now”/“then,” etc. What was quickly called the Arab Spring – or the Facebook revolution – did impact the ways in which politics and popular mobilisation were carried out (Bayat 2015; Honwana 2013). In many African countries, protests and social movements took on new forms, and civil society organisations and movements rejuvenated. Earlier and older social and political activists working through underground tracts were replaced by bloggers, social media activists, and rappers. In Togo, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo, Burundi, Senegal, Mali, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Sudan, to mention a few, street protests have come to dominate news reporting and social media flows. Sometimes it even becomes difficult to figure out what originates from traditional media and what comes from social media.¹⁰ Among the different platforms currently used in political and social struggles in West Africa, Facebook is one main channel, WhatsApp is another, and Twitter is a third.¹¹

Let me illustrate my point with an example. In September 2017, I suddenly started to receive a flow of images and video-clips on WhatsApp from a Togolese friend in Uppsala. He is a bus driver who has been living in Sweden for more than 30 years. He sent me all these pictures and videos because he wanted “to inform me” that “we have to do something.” In Togo, protesters were brutally oppressed by security forces as the opposition wanted to return to the 1992 Constitution and stop President Faure Gnassingbé from running for another presidential term. My smart phone was soon filled with horrific images and shaky video-clips that allegedly documented what was going on in the country. I have not (yet) visited Togo and am by no means a seasoned observer of politics and culture of the country. Still, I think my friend’s actions in sending images and video-clips from ongoing social and political protests exemplifies something significant in how activist-citizens’ images travel across the globe. To some extent, the “revolution,” as it were, may nowadays be perceived and experienced far away from the real social and political struggle, and violent repression. While those who are outside of the country are for sure, not exposed to violence and repression comparable to those in the country, the new connectivity that social media allows for, blurs clear-cut social, spatial, and temporal distinctions. Therefore, we need to critically analyse

¹⁰ This is of course not a particularly African problem, and it has accentuated in the so-called Trump-Bannon doctrine (see Hart 2020).

¹¹ In December 2020, there were more than 233 million Facebook subscribers in Africa (Boakey 2021).

the production and sharing of images and video-clips as new forms of political action.

In the following section, I highlight different themes of the images and video-clips that documented the two critical events of the 2014 popular insurrection and the 2015 resistance against the coup in Burkina Faso.

Instant information

The first and immediate use of social media was to show the world what was going on. On the morning of 30 October 2014, an assault was launched on the National Assembly and it was destroyed by thousands and thousands of mostly young protesters just before the Bill on Constitutional change would have been voted upon. Protesters then marched to the luxury neighbourhood Ouaga2000 where the presidential palace is located. There, the RSP soldiers shot live rounds, killing two young men and wounding many others. Another group attacked the house of François Compaoré, the young brother of the president. One young man was killed on the Boulevard just outside François Compaoré's "bunker."¹² These killings were quickly documented by other protesters, and soon photos of dead bodies were published on Facebook. These were detailed pictures of young, visibly unarmed, children who had been shot to death by the RSP. In contrast to other armed forces, the RSP was the only military unit that clearly sided with the Compaoré regime. In accordance with professional journalistic norms, most of these photos of dead bodies were not published in established media outlets, like lefaso.net, and omega.bf, let alone by international news agencies. Ethically, it would even have been difficult to justify the outright publication of identifiable dead bodies bathed in blood. Yet on social media, these were shared to the outcry and agony of users. The images and video-clips documented details of what really happened on these days when Compaoré and his regime fell (Hagberg et al. 2015, 2018).



Figure 1: A young man killed on 30 October 2014. Image from Facebook.

¹² In Burkinabe French, the term "bunker" is often used to designate luxury houses of power-holders, alluding to the fortress character of the buildings erected by the *nouveaux riches*. In the case of François Compaoré, he was particularly hated for having abused power in his ambiguous capacity of "petit président."



Figure 2: A victim killed during the 2015 resistance. Image from Facebook.

In September 2015, a similar urge to document dead bodies took place during the resistance against the coup d'état. Largely unknown users published photos of dead bodies, unarmed victims of this RSP coup (Hagberg 2015). A few weeks later, a ceremony was organised at the Place de la Révolution to honour the memories of the victims. Most were very young people.



Figure 3: The public ceremony on 9 October 2015 in the memory of the victims fallen in the resistance against the 2015 coup. Photo: Sten Hagberg

The publication of photographs of dead bodies was an attempt to document and spread the news about violent events, as they were unfolding. It would probably be erroneous to try to read more from these photos. Still, they do represent a shocking way of making a difference; when dead bodies were displayed in social media, followers reacted with anger and despair. In interviews carried out just after the 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance, many suggested that images of dead bodies galvanised the struggle (Hagberg et al. 2018). People

had sacrificed their lives and the publication of these images was an appeal to those still alive. For example, one interlocutor said that “the whole thing had become a sort of challenge that we all had to take up, even at the cost of our lives.” Nine months later, during the 2015 resistance against the coup d’état, images of dead bodies once again galvanised people. When seeing the atrocities committed by the RSP, many felt that the struggle was an absolute necessity, to honour the memory of dead comrades. And that the struggle had reached a point of no return.

The publication of pictures of dead bodies appealed to public opinion, blurring distinctions between national and international actors; all could see shocking images instantly published. One particular video-clip from the 2014 insurrection, showing protesters running towards RSP barricades in Ouaga2000, close to the presidential palace, shocked people. A young protester was suddenly shot dead, to the visible despair and fear of other protesters; the clip brutally documented a glimpse of the popular insurrection through the smartphone of one protester.

Mobilisation of global media attention

A second kind of photos and video-clips were more oriented to make comments, and directly push for further mobilisation. The dismantling of the statue of President Compaoré in Bobo-Dioulasso on 28 October 2014 was a high point of the movement. Located at the crossroads of the routes leading to Côte d’Ivoire and Mali, adjacent to Bobo-Dioulasso International Airport, the monument was composed of two statues representing Compaoré and Gaddafi. The statue of Compaoré was torn down, in a way that mirrored the tearing down of a statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad in 2003. The statue of Gaddafi was left untouched because he was still seen as an important benefactor, even a few years after his brutal death. For the protesters, reported lefaso.net, Gaddafi is eternal, and must continue to stand up in Bobo-Dioulasso (Lefaso.net 28/10/2014).



Figure 4: The statue of Blaise Compaoré is brought down by force in Bobo-Dioulasso. Image from Facebook.

Another image that caught global media attention was the photo of a banner with Compaoré as “the Ebola of Burkina Faso”; this slogan was written on many walls in the country in those days, making reference to the then ongoing Ebola epidemic in West Africa.



Figure 5: Blaise Compaoré equated with Ebola, the deadly epidemic. Image from Facebook.

Lots of films and photos showed young men challenging the regime. On 30 October, one young man took the banner that the MPs carry when on duty; he moved around so as to assert that the “National Assembly is now in the street.” Another image portrayed a man wearing a T-shirt with a shooting target and a message painted on the chest: “Shoot! The Fatherland or Death” (*Tirez! La Patrie ou La Mort*).¹³

The images and video-clips were used to portray current powerholders, and to show the courage of the protestors. The message was “we do not fear them any longer,” and this also made people pursue the struggle. These images caught global media attention. It makes good news reporting to show statues being torn down by enthusiastic protestors, or how they portray the president as a deadly virus. To some extent, humour and violence converged in these images and video-clips, which reinforced the sentiments of a peaceful revolution.

Sex, intimacy, and rumours

In October 2014, other photos showed Compaoré as blood thirsty. Many made fun of him. And in September 2015, there were numerous photos of General Gilbert Diendéré, often with satirical comments. A related strand is related to sex and intimacy. A photo of what allegedly was François Compaoré’s mattress was carried away by protestors who had been looting the house of the *petit président*. People quickly turned the house of the younger brother of Blaise Compaoré into “the Museum François Compaoré.” For many months to come, anyone could enter the house, and sellers of photos and videos set up stalls outside. Moreover, what was supposed to be the underwear of François Compaoré’s mother-in-law,

¹³ The expression *La Patrie ou La Mort: Nous Vaincrons*, was the main slogan during the Sankarist revolution in the 1980s and is still the last line of the National Anthem *Ditanyè*.

Alizéta Ouédraogo (nicknamed “Alizéta Gando”¹⁴), was displayed in public after her house was looted. The display of something so intimate of a powerful woman – she was also the president of Burkinabe Chamber of Commerce and Industry and one of the past regime’s most feared and hated actors – was a sexist way of denigrating her power and influence. The image of her underwear was immediately spread on social media.



Figure 6: Ransacking the houses of the *pétit président* and his mother-in-law. Images from Facebook.

A series of other images were spread from François Compaoré’s house, notably the alleged traces and pictures of sacrifices that would have taken place in the basement. One image was said to show a young woman sucking blood from a man who was lying on the ground, even though it is not very clear what this image really showed. Another one showed the head of a



Figure 7: A photo of a sheep head allegedly found in François Compaoré’s home. The photo was used to indicate that sacrifices had been carried out there. Image from Facebook.

¹⁴ The word *gando* translates to ‘leather-skin’ in Mooré, alluding to Alizéta Ouédraogo’s dominance and de facto monopoly of leather exports from Burkina Faso under Compaoré.

sheep, indicating that sacrifices had taken place there.

A third image was a traditional *bobo* (kaftan gown-like dress) with traces of blood, suggesting that it had been used when making sacrifices. Rumours about the Compaoré brothers' alleged practice of human sacrifices had circulated for long time.¹⁵ Such rumours about the practice of the occult by powerholders clinging to power have been investigated in various political analyses (ter Haar and Ellis 2009).¹⁶ To my mind, while recognising that discourses on occult politics are prevalent in many African countries, it is important to study popular accusations against powerholders said to practice the occult politics. Rumours and accusations, like conspiracy theories, may say more about those who utter them and their sense of powerlessness in society than the veracity of actual practice.

Stray bullets and everyday life

During the resistance against the coup d'état in September 2015, images were spread to show how ordinary people were affected by terror and violence of RSP soldiers (Hagberg 2015). One image widely shared showed how a bullet had penetrated a family's meal; their traditional porridge (*tô*) was hit by a bullet, but no-one was injured. Another image showed a newborn baby that had been hit by a bullet in its backside; fortunately, the bullet did not kill the baby.



Figure 8: Stray bullets hitting the evening dish and a newborn baby. Images from Facebook.

These images conveyed the message of uncontrolled, arbitrary violence used by the RSP coupists. Instead of maintaining order and discipline, these soldiers were randomly shooting live rounds and were indifferent to the consequences. Bullets penetrating a family meal, and even worse a newborn baby, demonstrated how no one was safe any longer.

¹⁵ In Burkina Faso, at the time of “the Zongo affair” in 1998–99 there were rumours accusing François Compaoré of having sacrificed an albino man and suggesting that his driver David Ouédraogo had been witness to this. The driver was tortured to death in what soon became “the David affair,” an incident that would ultimately lead to the assassination of Norbert Zongo in December 1998 (Hagberg 2002).

¹⁶ A debate emerged in *Africa* following the review article of Terence Ranger in 2007 (Ranger 2007; ter Haar and Ellis; Meyer 2009).

Beyond the capital

Another dimension revealed by images published on Facebook showed support from the whole country, as well as from the Burkinabe in the diaspora. The case of Bobo-Dioulasso is particularly interesting, because protesters in the city mobilised against Compaoré, even though the violent battle took place in Ouagadougou. In October 2022, *bobolais* protesters burned the City Hall and the Justice Palace, representing the Compaoré regime and its mismanagement. The central mayor Salia Sanou was a fervent supporter of Compaoré. Just days before the insurrection in October 2014, he told the regional section of civil society organisation *Balai Citoyen* “to march on their heads to Ouagadougou.”¹⁷ This was published in *L'Express du Faso*, a local daily, and as a reminder a photo of the article was published on Facebook on 5 November 2014, a few days after the fall of Compaoré.

In September 2015, Bobo-Dioulasso became the capital of resistance, as curfew was imposed in Ouagadougou. Images from those days show the power and determination of the protesters. Resistance was well organised and the imagery documents how protesters moved between the Bobo-Dioulasso's hotspots: the Tiefo Amoro Square in front of the railway station, the Military Region's HQ, the labour unions' bourse de travail.

To sum up, the images and video-clips that I have described here are among those that were widely shared on social media, notably Facebook and WhatsApp. They communicated different messages, including showing the outside world what was going on and simultaneously mobilising and galvanising protesters to pursue the struggle. They also made fun of powerholders in shameful ways (displaying mattress and underwear) and pointed to alleged human sacrifices in the basement of the house of François Compaoré. In the 2015 resistance, the impact on everyday life – stray bullets hitting a meal or a newborn baby – strengthened the viewpoint that RSP coupists were reckless and random brutes playing with the lives of ordinary Burkinabe.

Marketing Memories

Once the fall of Compaoré was over and the difficult negotiations regarding a political transition began, life started to return to some kind of normality. Yet a street market of images, posters, and video-clips emerged with numerous street vendors selling CDs and DVDs. Right in front of François Compaoré's house, which had been looted and which was then turned into “the Museum François Compaoré,” vendors made a business of selling photos and posters from the fall of the regime. Though these street vendors were making money out of an opportunity, but by doing so they were also contributing to memory making. By marketing tangible memories people could get hold of “proofs” (images, CDs, DVDs, posters) of what had happened during the 2014 insurrection.

A similar marketing of memories took place in September-October 2015 after the coup d'état had failed and the RSP had been disarmed and dissolved (Hagberg 2015). On 9 October 2015, a ceremony which I also attended, was organised in memory of the victims, with many street vendors selling photos and posters.

Marketing memories reinforced dominant narratives that soon came to shape the ways in which people referred to these events. The fall of Compaoré made his supporters become discrete and keep quiet for the coming months. The 2014 insurrection, and the

¹⁷ *Qu'ils marchent sur leurs têtes jusqu'à Ouagadougou.*



Figure 9: Marketing memories outside the “Museum François Compaoré.”
Photo: Sten Hagberg.

2015 resistance meant that the country changed direction, and people took pride in, and were consciously aware about these critical events in its modern political history. “Nothing,” so it was argued, “will be as before.”

There were also state initiatives aimed at producing public memories. The political transition led by Kafando in 2014-15 was particularly active in producing memories. The Monument of National Heroes in Ouaga2000 is the most evident example (Gabriel 2017). And in 2020 under the presidency of Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, a Memorial of the late President Sankara was inaugurated in central Ouagadougou. Important contributions were also made by Ciné Droit Libre, a web-based TV-channel run by Semfilms (<http://www.droitlibre.net/>). Funded by Danish and Swedish development aid, these actors played a key role in the 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance. They documented the ongoing popular struggle, often with smartphones coupled with more professional footage. The Ciné Droit Libre documented the events as they evolved. And the international connection made these actors more difficult to hit, even though they were in no way “untouchable.”

The memory making therefore, in the form of images and video-clips spread on social media was complemented by State and civil society driven initiatives. Yet the most dramatic and shocking images were produced on social media, most often by unknown Facebook users.

Freelancing testimonies

There were also freelancing testimonies. Paul Kabré, an independent photographer based in Bobo-Dioulasso, documented the 2015 resistance against the RSP coup. His pictures bear witness of how Bobo-Dioulasso became the capital of resistance over the course of a volatile week. This critical event meant that “the youth of Bobo-Dioulasso” showed that they were not just drinking tea, waiting for opportunities to fall from the sky.¹⁸ An image of a young woman protesting with a spatula in her hand soon became epic and was published by media outlets across the world (with no recognition given to Paul Kabré, let alone the young woman in question).¹⁹

¹⁸ In Burkina Faso, the youth of Bobo-Dioulasso are said to be passively waiting for job opportunities, in contrast to the entrepreneurial spirit of the youth of Ouagadougou. The stereotypes ascribe a laziness to young bobolais. The 2015 resistance somewhat changed that image of Bobo-Dioulasso's youth.

¹⁹ The woman was later identified as Guewaratou “Guebles” Zongo. She has since then emerged as a youth leader. Before the photo was taken by Paul Kabré, she was a largely unknown young activist who nevertheless had travelled from Ouagadougou to Bobo-Dioulasso, that is a distance of about 350 km, explicitly to support the resistance.



Figure 10: The iconic image of the Burkinabe resistance in Bobo-Dioulasso.
Photo: Paul Kabré.

Attempts to document the Burkinabe socio-political transformations have mushroomed in recent years. Locally produced books, homemade video-clips and engaged researchers (including our team of researchers) try to contribute to the understanding of “the new Burkina Faso,” and the memory making of its recent popular struggle. A host of books and other texts on the fall of Blaise Compaoré were produced locally, often written by Burkinabe academics or journalists who are not necessarily specialists in the subject and whose work rests on a rather vague empirical basis (Banténga 2016; Kaboré 2016; Sandwidi n.d.a, n.d.b; Sanon 2015; Ouédraogo 2016; Oulon 2018a, 2018b; Siguiré 2015, 2016; Tougouma 2016, n.d.; Traoré 2016).

The interesting thing with these works is that they come close to a testimony literature, documenting and providing ones’ viewpoints of the events. International scholarly literature apart, it is indeed interesting to see how documenting the details and summarising “what really happened” has become such an important literary genre in present-day Burkina Faso. Books are sold at gas stations in the major cities, and they do attract readership. Some of the books conspicuously lack proper referencing and, oftentimes, no publisher is involved. To my mind, these books represent an informal literature that is in fact, a mimicry of formal, scholarly literature. They all seek to bear witness of the two critical events – the 2014 popular insurrection that ousted President Compaoré from power, and the 2015 resistance against the coup d’état perpetrated by the RSP – of contemporary Burkina Faso. At the same time, they also seek to market memories, and make some money from book sales, apart from making a name for themselves.

Discussion

In this article, I have sought to analyse images and films published on Facebook, WhatsApp, and other social media in relation to two events of recent Burkinabe political history: the popular insurrection in October-November 2014, and the resistance against the coup d’état in September 2015. These two events are part of social and political transformations that the

country has experienced in recent years. They are critical events in the sense of the term as Veena Das (1995) has written about: they have instituted new forms of action which have, in turn, redefined traditional social and political categories. Even though there is a political continuity – for instance, prevailing political practices, or the fact that President Kaboré was one of the architects in the past regime, or the involvement of the army in politics, etc. – the discourses were definitely redefined. These events changed something fundamental in Burkinabe political culture and framed new forms of political action.

However, this strong popular mobilisation against the Compaoré regime, and the coupists in 2014–2015 sharply contrasts with the absence of protests and resistance against the coup d'état perpetrated by Lieutenant Colonel Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba to oust President Kaboré from power in January 2022. Since his election in 2015 and his re-election in 2020, Kaboré's reign had come to be seen as a failure, and his removal from office in the 24 January 2022 coup d'état was seen as a relief by many. But when the new coup leader Damiba did not meet people's expectations – and even worse, when he invited former president Compaoré to a meeting in Ouagadougou in early July 2022 despite the fact that Compaoré had been convicted by Burkinabe law – a second coup d'état led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré took place in September 2022, and it was met with strong popular support. Although the insecurity had completely changed the situation and the Burkinabe put their hope in the army, for many the memory of the victims of the 2014 insurrection and the 2015 resistance must be kept alive (Hagberg et al. 2019, 2023).

The production and sharing of images and video-clips discussed here complements professional endeavours of taking photos and of making films. And yet they must be contextualised as a particular form of memory making and marketing in the midst of popular struggle for democracy and the rule of law. The sharing of images and video-clips on Facebook and WhatsApp simultaneously documented events and mobilised people in the midst of the crisis. In this vein, they were not different from the more professionalised attempts of Ciné Droit Libre and freelance photographers like Paul Kabré that also sought to document and engage the Burkinabe public in a struggle that would pave the way for “a new Burkina Faso.”

If we move beyond this particular Burkinabe case, similar processes of memory making, and marketing have been observed in contemporary political upheavals. In the first half of 2019, protesters in Sudan were particularly successful in mobilising the street, the media, and the social media to oust President Omar al-Bashir from power; on 11 April al-Bashir fell and was replaced by a military transition that however was not satisfactory to protesters, and 48 hours later a new military transition was installed, amidst negotiations and renewed violent repression against the protesters later on. In Mali, events such as the military takeover in 2020, after a broad protest movement had mobilised against President Keita, show how images and video-clips have become part and parcel of memory making (Hagberg et al. 2023 forthcoming). In other words, popular struggles in any part of the world nowadays rely on the mutually reinforcing actions in the street, and the instant documentation and sharing of these actions as photos and video-clips on social media.

The cross-fertilisation of mobile films, social media and popular struggle tells a particular story of contemporary socio-political transformations. In such arenas, the boundaries between “us”/“them,” “here”/“there,” “now”/“then,” are blurred. Diaspora communities and seasoned experts interact with protesters and online activists, as well as with anonymous

followers in order to support change and strengthen social and political action (see Bernal 2014; Hall 2022; Kirwin et al. 2022). But let me be clear: there is no such thing as a “Facebook revolution,” as some analysts suggested for the Tunisian revolution 2010-11. Instead, political culture and historical legacy are as important for such transformations as are the social media that allow for images and video-clips to be instantly shared on smartphones across the country and beyond. And activists in the street do risk their lives in a way most online activists do not. In other words, the memory making in the contemporary social media dramaturgy is also inscribed in a long-term continuity of popular struggle. And memory making is also part of a marketing of memories, of making money from such critical events.

Acknowledgements

This article has a long history. It was presented at the Conference of the Association for the Anthropology of Social Change and Development in Roskilde in May 2018, and in an expanded version at the African Studies Association’s Meeting in Philadelphia in November 2022. Between those conference presentations, the article has received insightful comments from several colleagues, including David Lewis, Dennis Rodgers, Michael Woolcock, Heidi Bojsen, Paul Kabré, Joseph Hellweg, Rosa de Jorio, Susan Gagliardi, and Jörgen Hellman, as well as anonymous reviewers of *kritisk etnografi*. Thank you all! Thousands of thanks to my colleagues with whom I conducted collaborative fieldwork: Ludovic Kibora, Adjara Konkobo, Siaka Gnessi, Sidi Barry, and Firmin Nana. The article is one of several publications coming out as a result of our joint collaborative research in Burkina Faso (see Hagberg et al. 2018, 2019, 2021, 2023).

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