

Cultural Traditions and Visions of Modernity: A Monument for the Independence Jubilee in Burkina Faso

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In the « African Year » 2010, Burkina Faso was the last country to celebrate its golden jubilee of independence on December 11th. The government used the Independence Day celebration as an occasion to boost the nation's image abroad. Already during the campaign for the presidential elections, which took place only one month before the celebrations, President Blaise Compaoré presented himself as “the constructor” of the country and proposed huge modernisation projects. The government provided an image of Burkina Faso as an emergent nation marked by a mixture of consciousness of tradition and striving for modernity. Accordingly, the motto of the Independence Day celebration “50 years of nation-building: remembrance and esperance” should invite a reflection on the nation's past in order to build a brighter future. In the run-up to the celebrations, Bobo-Dioulasso, capital city of the region Hauts-Bassins and host of the 50th anniversary of independence became the sight of large infrastructural changes.

At the same time, the independence jubilee can be seen as a forum for debate about the future course of development the country should take. The residents of Bobo-Dioulasso largely criticized the development expenses as not serving the population's needs. Furthermore, they called into question the appropriateness of a celebration in light of the country's political and socio-economic state and stressed the need for a critical evaluation of the past fifty years.

In this paper, I focus on a monument built for the independence jubilee in Bobo-Dioulasso. The 30 meter high monument is rich in cultural symbols and contains the iconography native to different regions of Burkina Faso. It is meant to commemorate the historical sacrifices made during the struggle for the country's independence and, at the same time, appeals to the people's ambition to jointly engage in the future development of the country. The residents' reactions to the monument reflect their general attitude towards the independence jubilee celebrations. While agreeing with the cultural representation of the nation, a considerable number of people calls into question the existence of a ‘real’ independence and takes the view that, rather than spending money on celebrations and monuments, the government should address more important issues such as satisfying basic needs and guaranteeing human rights.

