

Political Rituals in Public Space: Democratic Culture and the Politics of Events in Burkina Faso

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This paper is about modern political rituals organized in villages, neighbourhoods, towns, and cities, and most often in the capital. The inauguration of a new market, the launching of a vaccination campaign, and the arrival of foreign partners to the locality tend to be marked by solemn ceremonies. These events are here approached as political rituals enacted in public space, and they therefore form part and parcel of present-day democratic culture.

In Burkina Faso the dramaturgy of such rituals follows a well-known and widely recognized procedure: the welcoming words of the local power-holders (mayor, village head and/or local state representative); the speech of the official highest in rank of the given ministry (from the minister down to the provincial head); the music and/or dance performance of a local troupe; and the official inauguration, followed by refreshments for the authorities and invited guests. These political rituals are stylized and standardized events during which political actors seek visibility and recognition.

By using ethnographic examples from the recent 50th anniversary of Burkina Faso's independence in December 2011, this paper demonstrates the extent to which rituals are instrumental in the process of appropriating infrastructure and investments emanating from foreign aid. They represent dramatized events by which political actors make sense of democracy, and imbue meaning and context to development aid. But these rituals simultaneously articulate a democratic culture where politics is guided by public events rather than political programs and visions for the future.