A chief’s fatal car accident: 
Political history and moral 
geography in Burkina Faso

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Introduction

The car crash that is central to this contribution highlights contemporary political processes in Burkina Faso. The chapter presents a range of interpretations offered by people in Burkina Faso when this fatal crash took place on 10 March 1995, killing Chief1 Sanem, the newly appointed chief of one of the Mossi chiefdoms. Only in June 1994 had the chief been nominated to the chiefdom of Maane, which lies some 100 km North of the capital, Ouagadougou, and has the administrative status of a département. Chief Sanem’s nomination was the result of a particularly fierce succession struggle. The following newspaper article shows that this car accident generated a plethora of interpretations:

L’Observateur Paalga of 17-19 March 1995 reported what happened:

Chief Sanem of Maane died on Friday 10 March 1995 (it was actually Saturday 11 March, SL), a victim of an accident while on the road to Boussouma for a courtesy visit to the paramount chief of the region, Naaba Sonre. A lot of interpretations are circulating about this tragedy since it is just a year since this illustrious citizen was inaugurated, after the throne had been vacant for over a year for political as well as other reasons. For some, it was a massive blow from the side of the guardians of tradition. For others, it corresponded to a logic stipulating that the successor to a chief who has reigned for a very long time (over thirty years) cannot last long. The

1 In Moore, the local language, a chief is called a naaba.
population is living in anxiety, having already suffered the demise of Chief Tigré, the predecessor to the person they are mourning today.²

The newspaper article informs the reader that the chief met with this fatal accident on his way to visit the paramount chief of the region, the Chief of Boussouma. A crucial player in the succession struggle, the paramount chief had finally decided to nominate Chief Sanem, despite the fact that, according to generally accepted rules, he was not considered a legitimate candidate. The article refers to the variety of interpretations surrounding his death. Was he killed by traditional power holders or had his predecessor’s long reign been the cause of his demise?

This article deals with the numerous explanations this car accident engendered, many referring to the struggles and the rituals connected to the succession, breaches in correct social behaviour and the dangers of being on the road.

Sally Falk Moore³ demonstrates beautifully how events that take place during fieldwork can be used for writing current history. Events with even the least temporally stretched-out episodes, ‘chopped-off anecdotes’ as she calls them, can be indicators of processes at many levels.⁴ Two of the three cases she uses to write history in this manner involve fatal car accidents that took place in the Mount Kilimanjaro region shortly after Tanzania’s independence, each highlighting a larger political arena, economic conflict over land, and/or historical processes related to interactions between local and Christian beliefs.

In this chapter I follow Sally Falk Moore’s example and centre on interpretations of a fatal car accident to write a contemporary history, in this case of political developments in the central part of Burkina Faso. Interpretations of the accident are used to illustrate features of the political relations and ritual events characteristic of the recent succession struggle. However, the case also illustrates more general features of the explanations a dramatic event like a car accident may trigger. Car accidents take place on the road, they occur when making journeys away from home. How do the spatial specificities of a car

² Le naba Sanem de Mané s’est éteint le vendredi 10/3/95, victime d’un accident alors qu’il se rendait à Boussouma pour une visite de courtoise au ‘dima’ de la localité, le naba Sonré. Bien de supputations courent au sujet de cette tragédie puisqu’il y a à peine un an que l’illustre disparu a été intronisé, après plus d’un an de vacance de trône pour des raisons multiples dont celles politiques. Pour certains il s’agirait d’un coup fourré au niveau des dépositaires de la tradition. Pour d’autres ceci répond à une logique, le successeur d’un chef ayant régné longtemps (plus de trente ans) ne pouvant ‘faire long feu’. Quant à la population, elle vit dans la hantise, elle qui a déjà souffert le martyr après le décès de naba Tigré, prédécesseur de celui qu’elle pleure aujourd’hui.


⁴ Ibid. 734.