

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié. PhD

Zan Boko (1988)

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OVERVIEW

In the Mooré language from the country of Burkina Faso, which is used along French in this film, the expression “Zan Boko” means the place in the village where a woman's placenta is buried when her baby is born. It is the place that expresses the Mooré's strongest attachment to their native land and language. In the film *Zan Boko*, that place of Mooré mother tongue is now adjacent to a rapidly growing city with its new tongue, French. By opposing Mooré (the mother tongue) to French, (the language of the colonizer), the filmmaker reiterates a tension that is frequent in Francophone literatures, that of a precolonial language and its authentic values versus a colonial/postcolonial Western language and the inauthentic worldviews that it disseminates. The filmmaker's preference is unambiguous: Mooré language is the locus of tradition and culture, and those who speak it in the film are generally physically and mentally in harmony with their environment. French, on the other hand, is the locus of a physical and mental malaise, and the Africans who speak it are disturbed, depersonalized subjects, never physically and mentally satisfied with their environment.

CHARACTERS

Tinga (Joseph Nikiema): A peasant. He is determined to hold on to his ancestors' land against the rapid tide of urbanization.

Napoko (Colette Kaboré): Tinga's wife

Tougouri (Jean-François Ouedraogo): A city dweller who has become Tinga's new neighbor with the expansion of the city. He is determined to buy Tinga's land to build himself a swimming pool.

Yabré (Celestin Zongo): A journalist. He decides to investigate and expose the way the peasants are being robbed of their lands.

SYNOPSIS

The life of a small Burkina Faso village, punctuated by the sounds of harvesters, the pace of pestles and the conversations of women at the well. is upset when topographers arrive with their intimidating tools. The city of Ouagadougou extends inexorably towards the villages, and with its expansion, also arrive powerful, rapacious city dwellers ready to snatch the lands of the peasants. While most of the farmers sell their ancestral lands and vacate the place, Tinga and his family resist the assaults of their neighbors, city dwellers who have bought the adjoining land, and who covet their plot. After multiple pressures exerted on him by his neighbors and the authorities, Tinga is also forced to declare defeat. He loses his ancestors' estate land to expropriation. A conscientious television journalist makes it his duty to investigate and expose the officials' illegal practices that have caused peasants like Tinga to be dispossessed of their birthright. His superiors fire him when he allows Tinga to make a surprise appearance on live television to tell his story.

SCENES

A peasant's life The camera pans over a serene pastoral scene. Pregnant Napoko is pounding millet. Carrying an earth pot, her daughter Talato is walking to the well to collect potable water. In the distance, her son Tibo is playfully running ahead of his sister. Tinga, Napoko's husband, is sitting under a shed carving a tool handle. His father slowly walks to him and sits in front of him. He tells his son that he is worried



about Napoko's present pregnancy, because she has had difficult deliveries in the past. He asks Tinga to go fetch some water for a ritual.

Napoko's delivery day This time, as before, Napoko's delivery is proving difficult, and it worries the whole village. The men have come to support Tinga, and the women are assisting the midwives in the delivery hut.



The water ritual One of the midwives comes out of the delivery hut. Napoko's condition is worsening, and the midwife demands that Tinga perform the water ritual. A bowl of water is brought to Tinga. One midwife asks him if there is any tension between his wife and him that might delay the childbirth. Tinga replies that he cannot think of any tension between them. The midwife hands Tinga a bowl of water, from which he takes three mouthfuls that he blows on the ground. Napoko's delivery goes well, and she gives birth to a beautiful and strong boy.



Communal work The men and women of the village gather to work collectively on the field of one farmer. The women come carrying baskets of millet, which the men help them spread on the ground. Then, outfitted with a stick, they all beat the millet to separate the grains from the stalks. Some women bring food and water to the worksite to feed the workers and quench their thirst.



The City's expansion The news that the city of Ouagadougou will be extended to encroach on the village domain has reached the village and is causing much consternation among the villagers. Government surveyors have come to take topographic measurements. They have numbered the village huts in white paint. The villagers complain that the white numbers haunt their nights and prevent them from sleeping soundly.



Tinga's resistance Many villagers have sold their lands and left, and the villagers' mud huts are now being replaced with high-rises. Tinga is determined to hold on to his ancestors' land. In a gesture of resistance, Tinga's son Tibo is scrubbing off the number that the surveyors inscribed on his family hut.



The village life is disappearing The once crowded village water well has been deserted, and the chatters of the villagers have now been replaced with the noises of modern music and the gossips of city folks attending ostentatious parties. Tinga has a new neighbor, a rich man called Tougouri, who does not hide from his guests that he is annoyed by the sight of Tinga's habitation. Tougouri's guests suggest that he build a swimming pool on Tinga's land.



Tougouri's project on Tinga's land Tinga's new neighbor, who has built a two-story villa with a plunging view into Tinga's home, has hired an architect to design an extension of his property with a pool that will sit on Tinga's property. He is making plans to occupy Tinga's plot without even having reached an agreement with him.



The burden on the village school The newcomers' children have increased the burden on the village school. The peasants line up and beg school officials to enroll their children, but the places are limited, and the strenuous acceptance conditions end up rejecting many local children. Tinga is one of the lucky ones. He obtains a seat for Tibo.



Peasant vs. urban mothers The contrast between Napoko, the peasant mother, and Mr. Tougouri's wife is on display: Napoko is pregnant and approaching her delivery date; yet, she has little time to rest. She grinds and pounds millet from her farm, cooks the family meal, cleans her house, and prepares *soumbala* balls (a traditional equivalent of bouillon cubes) to sell on the local market with her daughter's help. As for Mrs. Tougouri, her days are spent relaxing, reading, and playing games in her garden with her children. She has a servant who cooks for the family and a houseboy to take care of her house and her garden.



Tougouri's tactics Tougouri uses a combination of force and persuasion to harass Tinga into selling him his land. He first sends an official to Napoko to warn her that he might take legal actions against her family because of the smell and flies that her *soumbala* business causes. *Soumbala* has a pungent smell and does unavoidably attracts tropical flies, which Napoko explains to the official. Unless she stops her business there will be flies and smells, she tells the official. After his threats fail to scare Tinga's family away, Tougouri sends in his watchman to try and convince Tinga to sell him his land.



Like father, like son Tinga's son, Tibo, has spent hours proudly building himself a toy car from sticks of wood. Tougouri's son borrows the toy for a few minutes and then wants to buy it from Tibo. The young boy refuses to take money for the toy, but instead offers it as a gift to his playmate, who refuses, saying that he will not accept it if he cannot buy it.



Tougouri's last proposition As Tinga refuses to sell his property to his rich neighbor, Tougouri purchases a new home further in the country, which he proposes to give to Tinga in exchange for his land. Tougouri's watchman drives Tinga to see the new house and tries to convince him to accept the offer. This latest act of harassment upsets Tinga, who decides to cut all ties with the watchman, whom he finds dishonorable.



Tougouri activates his powerful network Tougouri is exasperated by Tinga's stubbornness. He decides that he must have Tinga's land at all costs. He activates his formidable network of influential government officials. Tinga is summoned by the officials and forced to sell his land. Tinga is not happy to be treated like an outsider on his ancestors' land, but he is powerless.



Yabré's obstacles A young journalist by the name of Yabre has reported on the arbitrary expropriation of the villagers that take place in the urbanization project. His supervisors summon him and sanction him with a six-month suspension.



Yabré perseveres Back on the job after a six-month suspension, Yabré is now assigned to television. His new assignment is about urbanization, and his boss gives him specific instructions not to advertise his opinion, but to follow the strict format. Yabré will not bend. Upon his return to work, he resumes his investigation on the expropriation of the villagers. He particularly seeks out Tinga whose story he wants to draw attention to.



The scandal On live television, Yabré blindsides his government official guests by probing them on the false excuses and questionable methods that they have been using to expropriate the peasants. He even invites Tinga as a surprise guest to tell his story to the nation. From the President to the Minister of the Interior to the television director, the officials scramble to stop the damage. They finally succeed in interrupting the broadcast. Yabre is fired.



CHARACTERS ANALYSIS

Tinga

Tinga seems to condense good qualities that the filmmaker wants to showcase in a man from the rural area. He is proud of his origins, thoughtful, respectful of others' viewpoints, helpful to his wife and neighbors.

Proud Tinga passes his skills to his son Tibo under the watchful eyes of Tibo's grandfather. Tinga is a proud man and proud of his ancestors' legacy, which he wants to protect and pass on to future generations. Unlike his brother, who has emigrated to Cote d'Ivoire and of whom the family has no news, and who was "irresponsible" enough to miss their father's funeral, Tinga sees himself as the depository of a family tradition that his daily conversations with his father helped strengthen and helped him curate. It is, therefore, out of the question that Tinga trade that tradition for profit; thus, his resistance against Tougouri's attempts to buy him out of his land. In fact, Tinga sees Tougouri's propositions as an insult, and the watchman who advertises these propositions as a dishonorable man who has sold his soul to the corrupt urbanite, Tougouri.

Sober Tinga is a man of few words. He speaks little, but he listens carefully. That sobriety is also observable in his consumption of alcohol. He drinks socially and never takes more than a few sips of *dolo* (millet beer). If Tinga frequents the local bar, it is more to find the latest news that peddles there than to drink abundantly. It is in the bar that Tinga learns that the city's expansion threatens his village and the village's fields; it is also in a local bar that he meets Yabré, the journalist who will make the peasants' struggle to keep their lands his own personal struggle.

Considerate Tinga is respectful of other people's opinions and nonjudgmental. When one of his friends almost apologetically confides in him that he has sold part of his land, one would think that, given his standpoint on upholding tradition by preserving ancestral land, Tinga would characterize him as a lost soul. Instead, Tinga finds a way to ease his guilt, telling him that he did what needed to be done in a difficult circumstance. When Tinga's friends worry about the future, Tinga reassures them that if they give each other a hand, the future will be bright. On issues of grave importance, Tinga consults with his wife Napoko before deciding. He is a man of consensus.

Supportive Tinga is supportive of his community and his family. He participates in the village communal work. His friends seek him for advice and comfort. He is attentive to his father's wellbeing, his children's traditional and modern education, and his wife's health.

Tougouri

Tougouri is the filmmaker's concentrate of disdain, excess, corruption, and depersonalization. These are, from the filmmaker's standpoint, depraved metropolitan values that come to pollute the rural area with the advance of the city. From this perspective, Tougouri is the antithesis of his neighbor Tinga.

Disdainful Tougouri's entire attitude towards his neighbors is marked by disgust. He never speaks to them directly. He always communicates with them through an intermediary, either his watchman or an employee of the municipality. He hates their food. He has no respect for their interest in the ancestral legacy. He simply wants to see them away from him so that he can occupy their land. For this, the end justifies the means. Tougouri has passed on his disdain of the peasantry to his son, who speaks to Tinga's son with arrogance and condescension.

Excessive Tougouri's life is one of excess. His two-story villa is disproportionate to the size of his family. It does not matter, however. He still wants Tinga's property so he can build himself a large swimming pool surrounded with a parterre of flowers. His parties are loud and extravagant displays of gaudiness and expensive champagne bottles.

Insensitive Tougouri organizes loud parties late into the night, inconsiderate of his neighbors and especially of his neighbors' infant who is trying to sleep. Yet, he must know, thanks to his balcony that towers over Tinga's property, that there is an infant in the neighbor's house.

Yabré

He is a young, idealistic, and hardworking journalist who understands his mission as that of informing the public. He could, like his many of his colleagues who, to keep their jobs, repeat the official speeches prepared for them, side with the most powerful. However, he chose the path of professional ethics and found himself crushed by the corrupt system.

Incorruptible For writing an article denouncing government malfeasance around the allocation of land in the urbanization process, Yabré received a six-month work suspension. This caused him to go through difficult times when even buying a bar of soap. Such a situation would have broken more than one person and caused them to repeat the "truth" according to the government to protect their jobs. For Yabré, however, the truth was that imposed on him by the results of his field investigations. So, no sooner had he been called back to work than Yabré continued his denunciations of urbanization, to the point of inviting Tinga on live television to tell the audience the injustice he had suffered at the hands of the powerful. These powerful people also eventually got the better of Yabré, who lost his job for challenging them.

Commendable Yabré is one of a rare breed of Africans working steadfastly to put a continent steeped in corruption on the rails of development. Their task is arduous, and the opposition they face is formidable and crushing, for African governments are in general allergic to free press. Yet, a free press is a facet of democracy. African journalists need the support of international journalists and non-governmental organizations to safely practice their trade or, though commendable, journalists like Yabré will become an endangered breed.

THEMES

Rootedness There is an African proverb that says: "take care of your children when they have no teeth, so that they can take care of you when you lose yours." This is a proposition for protection, stability, and continuity of familial ties and traditions. Tinga, who takes care of his elderly father and his children at the same time, certainly lives materially and psychologically by this precept. For that, Tinga has chosen to be profoundly rooted in his ancestors' land and tradition and to honor that land and that tradition. It would have been impossible for Tinga to care for his elderly father until his death had he been away from his ancestral land. It would have been impossible for Tinga to teach his child how to carve a tool, construct a toy with available native materials, build a straw panel, feel empathy, be a giver and not just a taker, were he not rooted in his family land. Similarly, it would have been impossible for Napoko to teach her daughter how to process *soumbala* and make a living out of it, how to care for her younger brothers in preparation for her own role as a mother, were she not territorialized to Zan Boko, the title of the film, which denotes

where one's placenta is buried. To leave Zan Boko, the place that watches over one's placenta, is to betray that rootedness. Leaving Zan Boko is tantamount to wandering soullessly without anchor or guiding values. That is why, Tinga, who is generally not a judgmental man, nonetheless has some very harsh words for his brother, who has emigrated to Cote d'Ivoire and has not even made an appearance at his father's funeral. Kouma, he says, is an idiot and completely irresponsible. Three generations of Tinga's family are simultaneously living on the family land. Tinga's hope is to see his child Tibo carry on the family traditions on the family land, for one's rapport with the ancestors passes through the land.

Loss of the exilic subject In his exile in Cote d'Ivoire, Kouma has alienated himself from his Mooré culture and his family traditions. Exile is detachment and alienation from one's culture. However, it is not just physical exile that alienates, the filmmaker would have us believe. Cultural alienation can also take place when one simply exiles oneself from one's original language and uses a foreign language as *lingua franca*, since, by adopting a new language, one also adopts the worldview, the mentalities, and the values of that language. This is the case with the Tougouri family. They have adopted French, speak French among themselves, act French (or at least like Westerners), with the values of Westerners. Like the former French colonizers, the Tougouris are selfish, greedy, individualistic, arrogant, condescending, and disrespectful of tradition. These Western values of arrogance, greed, and condescension, the Tougouris have also passed on to their children, who fight to have the best seats in the car, who play with toys purchased in the store, rather than toys they learn to make with their hands, who think that their parents' money is more important than friendship.

Cultural and spiritual responsibilities Rootedness in the land entails some social and spiritual responsibilities. Regularly visiting neighbors and exchanging gifts, such as *soumbala*, shea butter, or cola nuts, sitting with neighbors around a big steamy dish into which all the guests' hands dip, collectively helping fellow peasants to harvest their crops or to replace their roofs, supporting neighbors in times of distress, as during Napoko's difficult delivery, but also sharing their joys--these are all social responsibilities that Tinga and his family share with the villagers. Spiritually, everyone must gather to witness the birth and the naming of a new member in the community, in this case, Napoko's newborn. Above all, conflicts must be resolved before that new member is named into the community. The midwives want confirmation that Napoko's difficult delivery is not the consequence of any acrimony in the couple. To make sure, they ask Tinga to perform the water ritual to eliminate any repressed rancor he may be harboring towards his wife. These are Mooré people's social and animist spiritual responsibilities to which Tinga and all the other villagers abide, and which retroactively consolidate their attachment to their ancestors' land.

Greed *Zan Boko* suggests that Mr. Tougouri and his government official friends are corrupt because they are entangled in a language, French, whose fundamental values can be summarized in one word: covetousness. Unlike the speakers of the Mooré mother tongue, who are content with what nature gives them, and who respect the natural environment, The French-educated Africans are in a stupor for greater and greater accumulation of wealth. Mr. Tougouri has a two-story villa, but it is not enough for him. He wants Tinga's land, and in a compulsive desire to get it, he schemes all sorts of plans, from using soft persuasion (proposing money or another house for trade) to using his influential friends to dispossess Tinga. The same syndrome that has driven the French to carve for themselves the largest portion of African territories during the colonial days, is also driving those African who are touched, and contaminated, by French literacy to greedily launch into a land grab against their own country men and women. When their illegal methods are exposed, they use all sorts of corrupt contortions to cover their transgressions and restore their image.

Waste of the national granaries Most African governments are quick to state the significance of agriculture in their countries' economies; and they are right. The rural zone is known to be the granary of any country, which is even more true in Africa. Yet, as this crucial aspect of the economy remains vulnerable to the devastation of unpredictable natural woes, such as, drought, parasite invasion, and forest fires, the governments, not only do little to alter these variables, but they also weaken agriculture by undermining farmlands with precipitous, irresponsible deforestation and urbanization programs. The kind of unbridled urbanization that takes place in *Zan Boko*, and which destroys farmers and their farmlands,

exposes the state to food dependency. By indiscriminately transforming the farmlands into urban centers, African states precipitate their social decay, for they expose themselves to famine while pauperizing the many families that rely on agricultural activities for their economic sustenance. If, in addition to importing manufactured goods, Africa were to import agricultural goods, and particularly provisions of sustenance, on a large scale, the result would be catastrophic.

Absence of social welfare In *Zan Boko*, among the peasants' concerns are the welfare of the newborns and their mothers and the education of children. Napoko has had difficult pregnancies in the past, and her present delivery is also proving challenging for the midwives. Also, on registration day, many parents line up only to see their hopes of having their children get their names on the roster dashed. These are problems typical to most African countries. The future of Africa's children is hypothetical from the very moment they are conceived. Yet, Africa's youth constitute the largest portion of its population because of the continent's low life expectancy. This youth is a potentially expanding consumption base that ought to be tapped into through a variety of social development programs. As the film demonstrates, African governments need to create populations fit to work by tending to the welfare of women and children and by educating its youth.

Invisibility of the peasantry Tinga's rich neighbor, Tougouri, organizes loud parties late into the night without any consideration for Tinga's family and especially their young infant trying to sleep. At those parties, Tougouri and his guests discuss the possibility of removing Tinga from the neighborhood to expand the host's domain. Tougouri tries to intimidate Napoko by sending an official to warn her about the smell and the flies that her commerce of *soumbala* (a local culinary ingredient) generates. He also repeatedly sends his watchman to convince Tinga to sell him his property. And when Tinga refuses, Tougouri activates his network of powerful friends in the government to evict him. Tougouri's and his guests' attitude towards Tinga and his family is typical of the African elites' systemic disdain against the African peasantry. Most of the African elites, fascinated by the gaudiness of Western life, abhor the African peasantry, simply because the abject poverty of that peasantry reminds them of their own poor origins from which they would like to steer away both physically and mentally. The peasantry, the symptoms of the elites' discomfort, must disappear, must be invisible. The elite's disdain towards the peasantry, which causes the invisibility of that peasantry, prevents the elites from undertaking welfare programs for the rural classes. Yet, it is the hard work of that rural class that feeds the urban centers.

Necessary reorganization of Agriculture Despite her difficult pregnancy, Tinga's wife is bent over an old stone grinder, manually grinding millet when she is not pounding seeds to make *soumbala* to sell on the local market. During their communal work, the villagers separate the millet grains from their stems by beating the harvest with long wooden sticks. Too many farmers in Africa continue to work on tiny strips of land with very limited or archaic implements. Though agriculture plays a crucial role in ensuring Africa's food independence, it is still outdated and disorganized; and this disorganization keeps the peasantry in a spiral of poverty and the states' level of resilience precarious. For African agriculture to fully play its role of preparing the state for industrial takeoff, it will need to be reorganized. African states ought to encourage farmers' organization into larger collectivized entities. Against the one-sided recommendations of the WTO, the World Bank, and the industrialized states that agricultural subsidies be eliminated, African states must openly support these collectivized entities by outfitting them with tools, grains, shoots, fertilizers, and irrigation systems to help them increase their outputs.

Implementing gender fairness The land on which Napoko works belongs to her husband Tinga. His father passed it on to him, who received it from his own father. Tinga will pass it on to his son Tibo and not to his daughter Talato. Talato, as we learn in *Zan Boko*, is being prepared for her imminent Marriage. She will go work on her husband's land, but she will never be a landowner herself. This outlines a serious problem African women face in rural areas: The lack of women's land ownership. African governments must repair this gender inequity as they reorganize agriculture towards market economy.

Legal desert Tinga's rich neighbor is representative of the upper and middle classes that only see their interests in illegitimacy because there are no official provisions forcing them to operate in legality. In fact, they contribute to the promotion and perpetuation of illegitimacy by cramping the legislative system.

In the legal vacuum, in the disorder created by the absence of legislation, the law is that which the strongest, the richest, and the well-connected decree as such. In this free-for-all, as we see in *Zan Boko*, it is the vulnerable populations, the women, the children, the elderly, the people in the rural zones, that are pushed off the cliff. For instance, Tinga's resistance to selling his land to his rich neighbor is broken by just a single telephone call placed to the right person. The peasant is thus forced to sell his land and make room for his rich neighbor to build his swimming pool. Likewise, when the city phagocytizes the village, the school system is cramped, because those of have registration priority are the children of rich parents who have just invaded the rural zone. The peasants line up in the sun for hours hoping to register their children, only to find out that there are not enough seats for them. This yoke of corruption can only be broken if Africa's middle class and upper class are constituted by people whose interests lie in legitimacy and transparency.

Maintenance and perpetuation of Poverty As we see in *Zan Boko*, the unbridled urbanization that causes the city to overtake the rural zone without properly addressing the crucial question of reception infrastructures, such as schools, has dire consequences. The storming of the school system by the children of city dwellers who get priority access throws the children of the peasants in the street without schooling and perpetuates social inequities on constructed bases. Children from rich families get better chances to succeed in life through education opportunities not on their merits, but because of the influence of their progenitors. Children from poor parents are set up by the corrupt system to fail in life, because they have been intentionally prevented from having access to education. Tinga's son is lucky. He has his name on the roster and will go to school to compete against children from rich families for a better future. Tibo will have a chance to break the cycle of poverty that has trapped two generations of his ascendants. However, for each poor child like him who gets the chance of an education, millions of other poor children are left behind and doomed to continue their parents' way of life. The situation presented in *Zan Boko* is prevalent in most African countries..