Dee-Jay: Now you know where we’re at. If you’re still uncertain, let me tell you that your deejay isn’t feeling all that cockshure himself. But there is to be a Coronation. An imperial coronation, first in Africa – at least in the last few decades or so. Emperor Boky, Boky the Cocky, no less – and if you think that’s mere boasting, ask him how many daughters presented their credentials when he advertised for his long-lost daughter from Indochina. He confirmed the claims of one and married the others. Man, he’s wa-a-a-ay – Out. Also known as Folksy Boksy on account of he likes to meet with the folks. You dig? The common folks, like vagrants, felons and – dig this – school children. Actually rubs feet with them – well, on them sort of – he’s gone beyond shaking hands – wow, he’s ahead man. Soyinka, *Opera Wonyosi*

Jean-Bedel Bokassa’s appearance as the archetypical African dictator in Wole Soyinka’s *Opera Wonyosi* should come as no great surprise. Discovered by the Western media early in his political career, he has been in the headlines ever since. The image is always the same. He is *le roi nègre* – cruel, self-indulgent, extravagant, and sexually obsessed, or he is “The Emperor who ate his People,” as one essay about him put it. Werner Herzog’s documentary film *Echos d’un sombre empire* is all too typical. Dwelling on the macabre, it shows footage of the imperial walk-in freezer and of lions that allegedly dined on His Majesty’s enemies.

In dealing with this controversial figure academics have hardly shown better judgment. Samuel Decalo writes of “documented instances of ritual cannibalism” on Bokassa’s part and of his personally bludgeoning schoolchildren to death. The Central African ruler is invariably described as “a brutal and ludicrous tyrant” or something similar. He is in a special category of disdain, along with
Equatorial Guinea’s Macias Nguema and Uganda’s Idi Amin, men who ruined their respective countries.  

The image of Bokassa as a caricature of everything that went wrong in postcolonial African politics stubbornly persists. He is all too readily dismissed as a blood-stained buffoon given to excesses of every description. There is some truth to this characterization, of course, but it is by no means the entire story, and much of what has been said about him is complete nonsense. The major challenge in writing about him, then, is to disentangle fact from fiction, fantasy, folklore, and sheer fabrication. This is the task I set myself in the study that follows. Most of all, I tried to give Bokassa a fair hearing. He deserves it just as much as anyone else.

This is a work of contemporary history, and my major concern is with Bokassa rather than with the Central African Republic or French policy in its former colonies, though both are given necessary attention. The focus is on the man, his views, motivations, and actions. His views are expressed in his own words where it has been possible to capture them, and his actions are sometimes described in blow-by-blow detail. In taking this approach, I was strongly influenced by Lawrence Stone’s celebrated article, “The Revival of Narrative.” Stone suggests that the new concern with finding out “what it was like to be there” has turned historians towards narrative and even to the “thick description” employed by some anthropologists. This accounts for my use of actual conversation, where it has been recorded, and my attention to the minutiae of some key events, such as the imperial coronation, Opération Barracuda, and the trial. Stone argues persuasively that Le Roy Ladurie’s notion of “history without people” had gone out of favour and that people, even single individuals, are once more the historian’s concern: “Since man is now our quarry, the narration of a very detailed story of a single incident or personality can make both good reading and good sense.” This does not mean that structural considerations have to be abandoned. History will always examine the relationship between structure, events, and human agency. The renewed emphasis on narrative, as Stone points out, is linked to a growing distrust of reductionism and determinism. By giving too much attention to structural and impersonal phenomena, the idiosyncratic actions of individuals are reduced to some predetermined response: men and women no longer influence the course of history; they are mere bystanders.

I take it for granted that a state such as the Central African Republic/ Empire, though officially independent, was constrained by the international environment, political and economic, and in particular by its ties to France, its former colonial master. Within these limitations,
however, and those dictated by its own resources, its leader had considerable leeway in his actions. Politics ultimately is about human behaviour, motivation, and action within a given context, which in its own complexity is unique. As Jackson and Rosberg show, many a promising African country has been ruined by its leader while others that were less promising have done well. Human agency is the critical variable.  

The study of a complex individual whose career followed many unexpected twists and turns encourages a certain level of modesty. Therefore, the claims I make for the book are necessarily limited. Because the evidence is often fragmentary, anecdotal, and even unreliable, I have resisted the temptation to impose an artificial order and coherence on events and circumstances that have a special vibrancy of their own. A single conceptual framework, as Patrick Chabal admits, just will not work. This does not mean that I have renounced all theoretical considerations, but I have tried to keep them as unobtrusive as possible in order to stay close to the concrete historical process. The following quotation from Stone, I think, puts it well:

No narrative historians, as I have defined them, avoid analysis altogether, but this is not the skeletal framework around which their work is constructed ... They are deeply concerned with the rhetorical aspects of their presentation. Whether successful or not in the attempt, they certainly aspire to stylistic elegance, wit and aphorism. They are not content to throw words down on a page and let them lie there, with the view that, since history is a science, it needs no art to help it along.

Even so, there are a number of concepts borrowed from political science which I have found useful in attempting to explain the Bokassa phenomenon. Neopatrimonialism, with the related notions of clientelism and the search for legitimacy, are the concepts in question. Borrowing from Max Weber, and first applied in the African context by Aristide Zolberg, they allow for a more balanced perspective on much of what happened in the Central African Republic/Empire.

The problem for the historian, I believe, is not to persuade but to communicate with the reader, who in any case will bring his or her own perception to the text. I am therefore less inclined to “have the last word” on Emperor Bokassa. Instead, I have tried to reconstruct his career as accurately as possible while accounting for the myths and distortions that have grown up around the man.

During the past decade a number of French authors, painting on vast and ambitious canvases, have attempted to explain the complexity
of African politics south of the Sahara. Works such as those by Jean-François Bayart and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch are only possible when the building blocks of more specialized studies are in place, be they studies of one country, one community, or one individual. This book seeks to serve in the latter capacity.
Colonel Bokassa shows off his military decorations at a press conference following his coup d'état. Bangui, 1 January 1966.

Bokassa is received at the Elysée Palace by President Giscard d’Estaing. Paris, 16 September 1974.

Coronation of Emperor Bokassa I. Bangui, 4 December 1977.
Bokassa, the Empress Catherine, and the crown prince watch a military parade the day after the imperial coronation. Bangui, 5 December 1977.