

*Thomas Sankara Speaks: the Burkina Faso revolution, 1983-87*

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Thomas Sankara led one of the most innovative revolutions in Africa this century. Even though short-lived and tragically aborted in 1987, with his own murder by soldiers under the command of Blaise Compaoré, the Burkinabe revolution now represents for many in Africa and the underdeveloped world a realistic and creative alternative to an ever deepening capitalist crisis and dependency. Sankara led the revolution with immense human warmth, charisma and originality. Significantly, he proved a formidable opponent to the politics of imperialism in the West African sub-region and an articulate spokesperson for the Third World poor. His memorable speech to the United Nations in 1984 is regarded by many as a Third World manifesto:

Honourable representatives of the international community, I am here to bring you fraternal greetings from a country that covers 274,000 square kilometers and whose seven million children, women, and men refuse henceforth to die from ignorance, hunger and thirst. These are people who, despite a quarter century of existence as a sovereign state represented here at the United Nations, are still not able to really live. I am here to address this thirty-ninth session in the name of a people that has decided, on the soil of its ancestors, henceforth to assert itself and to affirm and take charge of its own history – both its positive and negative aspects – without the slightest inhibition.

Sankara was a tremendously inspiring personality. Under him, Ouagadougou, the capital, became a significant nerve centre for African and Third World liberation, hosting conferences on the arts and culture, international solidarity and development. His politics combined an astute intellectualism, revolutionary socialism filtered through a sensitive appraisal of Burkinabe history and traditions with a belief in popular mobilisation through symbolic activities. The latter was given much effectiveness by Sankara's own flair for socio-political drama and revolutionary humour. This shines through his speeches, not least in the 'Our White House is in Black Harlem' speech. Or take the 22nd of September in Burkina Faso, designated as a day of solidarity with housewives when all men were encouraged to go to the market and prepare meals to experience for themselves conditions faced by women.

The book is a valuable resource for all those who wish to learn from the Burkinabe experience and Sankara's pivotal role in it. It brings together some of his most illuminating speeches, many in English, for the first time. They provide valuable insights into the politics of mass mobilisation during the revolution, particularly the complex war of

mobilisation during the revolution, particularly the complex war of ideological positions which informed its confrontation with imperialism.

The 'Political Orientation' speech, given in October 1983, is crucial for understanding the ideological underpinnings of the August revolution. Sankara sets them out with admirable clarity, contextualising the revolution within Burkinabe culture and history. The speech was given on behalf of the ruling group, the National Council of the Revolution (NCR). Subsequent events revealed serious differences over major aspects of it – though some commentators prefer to see these as quarrels over emphases, perhaps exacerbated by the contingencies of power politics. The most significant motor of the revolution, said the NCR, was the people, acting through the institutions of popular power, the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs). Yet they were excluded from the crucial deliberations on the direction of the revolution. Not unlike the Grenadan example under Maurice Bishop, the initiators of the revolution failed to institute effective mechanisms of communication between themselves and the people. In both situations, the politics of a popular revolution was ironically reduced to that within the ruling group. The masses were demobilised when they were most needed to defend the revolution.

In the social and economic spheres, the role of the CDRs proved significant. They released the latent energies of the people, unleashing one of the most creative transformations Africa has seen. Far-reaching reforms were introduced to tackle problems in the agricultural and industrial sectors. New laws encouraged production in the countryside whilst freeing peasants from oppressive traditional obligations. In health the novel 'commando' approach, involving locally trained medics, resulted in highly successful immunisation campaigns. Massive public housing construction programmes were initiated to accommodate the rural and urban poor; the country's economic infrastructure was extended by road and railway.

What comes over strongly in Sankara's speeches, in his own attitude to revolution and the institution of popular power, is his commitment to democracy. Significantly, he was prepared to grapple with the full implications of this principle. One can deduce from his praxis that he saw the NCR, an offshoot of the Burkinabe army, as essentially guaranteeing the conditions for the political self-mobilisation of the people: transforming them from objects of policy to its initiators. The people were to become the pace setters of the new national political culture, determining the tempo and ultimate realisation of the goals of revolution. This notion of revolutionary facilitation was accepted in principle by a clear majority in the ruling council, but its implementation came into conflict with factions committed to

determinist notions of the revolutionary vanguard. The issue of popular democracy, though, was by no means the only source of tensions in the council, tensions compounded by personality clashes and a complex interplay of political allegiances. All of this led to the tragic events of 15 October 1987.

No one has as yet provided a comprehensive analysis of the factors and events which led to the death of the revolution, important as it is for future experiments. A compilation of public speeches, this book could not, and did not, set itself the task of making any real assessment of the revolutionary agenda. What it does do is to provide essential background information and a good sense of Sankara's revolutionary vision. Like most compilations, it cannot escape being criticised for omissions. Some of Sankara's most illuminating speeches on culture – for example, one delivered at the opening of the last festival of Pan African Cinema – are not here. The book, however, powerfully calls to mind the possibilities there were in the revolution in Burkina Faso.