Thomas Sankara. *Thomas Sankara Speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983–87.* Atlanta: Pathfinder Press, 2007. 2nd edition. Edited by Michel Prairie. Translated by Samantha Anderson. 448 pp. Photographs. Maps. Figures. Tables. Chronology. Glossary. Index. $24.00. Paper.

Thomas Sankara was the leader of a junta of young military officers who took power in Upper Volta in 1983, ending a three-year interregnum that followed the overthrow of Sangoulé Lamizana. Sankara is widely viewed as an African political hero. He was young, handsome, and charismatic. He lived his anticorruption message, famously trading in his government Mercedes for a Renault. He was a fiery and colorful speaker. People in Burkina Faso still remember his memorable phrases, such as "Who are the enemies of the people?… Owls with the shady look in their eyes." His personal integrity and anti-neocolonial stance were passed on to the whole country when he renamed it Burkina Faso, "Land of Integrity." Unlike many leaders, especially those who led the anticolonial movements (one thinks of Nkrumah and Kenyatta), he did not allow his reputation to be sullied by the typical messy descent into repression.

Sankara was killed in 1987, at the metaphorical hand of his friend and second-in-command Blaise Compaoré, who then acceded to the presidency. Compaoré went on to have several of the other revolutionaries of 1983 killed, and his regime most notoriously killed the journalist Norbert Zongo for investigating corruption, torture, and murder among those close to Compaoré. So against the present stains, Sankara comes out looking relatively pure.

Pathfinder Press, which specializes in leftist, revolutionary texts and analyses, has come out with an expanded second edition of a collection of Thomas Sankara's speeches and interviews. There is real historical value and enduring inspiration in a close reading of many of these speeches. Sankara was a good wordsmith, and it is easy to see how two generations of Burkinabè continue to be in admiration of his oratory. Seen in written form and from the vantage point of twenty-five years later, however, many of the speeches appear filled with somewhat tiresome and repetitive revolutionary rhetoric.

One speech in particular, the famous "Speech of Political Orientation" (*Discours d'orientation politique*, or *DOP*) given on October 2, 1983, is an important policy document. Just before he was killed Sankara referred to the DOP as a major landmark in the history of Burkina Faso, if not the world. He was clearly very proud of the speech, which was apparently written by Valère Somé. The lengthy exposition defines the revolution as defiantly against imperialism (the word is used thirty-eight times in the text). Enemies of the revolution are branded with communist vocabulary. The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, the new state machinery, are identified and exhorted to do their work well, though their powers and responsibilities are not enumerated. The listener unfamiliar with Lenin's concept of democratic centralism, invoked deliberately by Sankara, would have had little idea of the practical intentions of the junta in terms of governance of the countryside. An interesting part of the speech is the emphasis on self-education and moral self-reform through reading, reflecting a modernization ideology of material prosperity that relies on transformation of the self.

There is no doubt that Sankara's heart was in the right place. But the DOP speech and others illustrate three features of Sankara's rule that I find troubling: (1) a readiness to substitute abstraction and jargon when specificity was called for; (2) an impatient and wishful understanding of the world; and (3) a tone of false modesty. For example, in one speech Sankara discussed the state's nationalization of land. There was no entertaining the prospect that perhaps the regime had little idea of the effects of such a hasty and broad-stroked legal change. In another speech, Sankara derided the formal legal system of Upper Volta, proposing an informal and possibly oral-based people's justice. But he did not explain how this justice was to be applied without written rules, or how such written rules would not once again quickly become the mechanism by which the powerful evaded the law.

Sankara was a confident revolutionary who wanted to transform society, but he was not particularly wise about society. He wanted to rule on the basis of trust and good-will, expecting that he could always persuade his detractors. This was precisely the argument that Blaise Compaoré's faction used to justify Sankara's killing. In criticizing Sankara, one runs the risk of appearing to legitimate Compaoré.

The speeches offer clues for thinking about some difficult questions in African studies. Why has the rhetoric of revolutionary struggle not been able to take root in most African countries? What could Sankara have said if he had gone the extra paragraph into specificity? That is, what would a successful revolutionary program in Africa actually have looked like? These are interesting and relevant questions, for the oppressive grinding poverty of most people in Africa surely means that incrementalists (like myself) have to be willing to entertain the merits of an appealing and realistic revolutionary program. Sankara's speeches are a good place to start.

Michael Kevane
Santa Clara University
Santa Clara, California