

## BOOK REVIEW

### Thomas Sankara Speaks

*The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983–87*

BY THOMAS SANKARA

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**Reviewed by:** Chenjerai Hove

#### An Open Letter to Thomas Sankara

Dear Thomas,

Now that you are gone for a year, and your speeches have been selected and published, I want to dialogue with you about some of the things you said, some of the ideas that made you a memorable Thomas Sankara.

You know, I was privileged to see you speak during the NAM summit in Harare in 1986. In that summit, you were the youngest of them all but you challenged your elders to re-think their position on NAM and its passive approach to world problems.

You were honest to point out: “We believe the world is divided into two antagonistic camps: the camp of the exploiters and the camp of the exploited.” You frankly bemoaned the absence of the spirit of the founding fathers of the Non-Aligned Movement: “But today, we surprise ourselves by wanting to cry out, ‘Tito, Nehru, Nasser, Kwame Nkrumah, wake up, the Non-Aligned Movement is dying’. We want to say to them with all the strength of our lungs and faith, ‘Help us, Namibia is still occupied, the Palestinian people are still searching for a home, and we are being traumatized by the foreign debts’.”

Yes I cry with you as I see the clarity of your thoughts and perceptions. You saw and had the courage to say it in your speeches. In the speech to the UN General Assembly, I hear the voice of the village peasant, the exploited worker, the oppressed everywhere. You bravely told them all, friends and foes: “I am here to address the 30th session in the name of a people that has decided on the soil of their ancestors henceforth to assert itself and affirm and take charge of its own history – both its positive and negative aspects – without the slightest inhibition.”

To my conscience, this was your positive contribution to our history, for you tackled it without any apologies. Some of our leaders deny their people’s participation in history, but you refused to apologize for us, to make us feel like children in the making of history. And you said it with much pain, facing the very faces which do not want us to create our own history, those who prefer us dead and buried, never to rise again.

Sankara, this speech to the United Nations did much for us. You were clear about so many issues. I know that most of our leaders brushed you aside for being a young man, a crazy one. And you admitted it in an interview with a foreign journalist with he asked you whether there was already a “Sankara Madness”. “You cannot carry out fundamental change without a certain amount of

madness. In this case it comes from nonconformity, the courage to turn your back on the old formulas, the courage to invent the future . . . it took the madmen of yesterday for us to be able to act with clarity today.

“I want to be one of those madmen. Yes, you were one of the rare ones who remained with a vision, the vision that taught you that bureaucracy can hijack the revolution. That is why you personally answered over 50 letters addressed to you from the people every week.

“Yes, we must dare to invent the future. All that comes from man’s imagination is realizable for man,” you said. A leader with a vibrant imagination. I write this letter because I already painfully miss you. But I hear the voice of your conscience every day, every night, haunting me, asking me questions about this continent which seems to be suffering more and more as it loses its brightest stars like you.

You make me feel guilty when you express your fears concerning the participants in the improvement of the lives of our people. You challenge the petty bourgeoisie because it is not prepared to give up its privileges . . . because it has tasted the Western way of life. Because of this, these petty bourgeois forget that all genuine political struggle requires vigorous, theoretical debate, and they refuse to rise to the intellectual effort of conceiving new concepts equal to the murderous struggle that lies ahead of us.

I hear your live, sincere voice in those words, challenging men to action. You stated it clearly when you said revolutions cannot be made of speeches and slogans, they are made of action. After all, slogans lose meaning and appeal with time. “We must even put a stop to certain kinds of praise that are poorly disguised and badly controlled expressions of feudal reflexes,” you said while refusing a slogan in your praise. “Thomas Sankara, may he forever be president,” the slogan went, and you refused it as an empty slogan.

Although it may sound bad of me to write to a dead person, I believe you are not dead. Actually you prophesied your own death, knowing only too well that it is the memory after death that matters. You grew up in the era of leaders who had been cheated into believing that they were demigods, only to have their statues torn to pieces soon after they died. I have told myself, either I’ll finish up an old man somewhere in a library reading books, or I’ll meet a violent end, since we have so many enemies. Once you’ve accepted that reality, it’s just a question of time. It will happen today or tomorrow. Such was your clarity of vision that to read your speeches makes one see the dream that you harboured for your people, for all the struggling people of the world.

On the emancipation of women, I have not read anything clearer. You put it well, questioning some of the assumptions which many leaders make. Your characteristic honesty pains me so much, it makes my heart wear out with the fatigue of missing you as I hear your voice speaking to all the women of the world, to the men as well: woman, this vast and complex combination of pain and joy, solitary and forsaken, yet creator of all humanity; suffering, frustrated, and humiliated, and yet endless source of happiness of each one of us; this being called weak, but possessing flesh and blood and spiritual conviction – this being, woman, is you . . . our comrades in struggles, and because of this fact you should by right assert yourselves as equal partners in the joyful victory feasts of the revolution (p. 202).

When you spoke about aid, you made it clear that you refused aid that crippled the creativity of our people. If our people receive aid, they must do so from friends who would not reduce them to

beggars. So, when they received aid, it must be aid that helps them to reassert themselves, their dignity and their pride. But look at what has happened in most of those countries which did not listen to people like you. Our people have been made slaves, conquered slaves who are seemingly happy in their slavery because of aid.

Thomas, I respect you for all you said. But I am sad that you openly admitted you rarely took the trouble to read literature. It is not good for a leader not to read books about people. Literature may be fiction, but it talks about the dark corners of human experience. Maybe you would have been able to sense the intentions of your murderers before they deprived us of your contribution to this endless struggle which sometimes throws me into feats of despair. Yes, Thomas, real feats of despair, especially when every committed leader, a leader who listens to his people, is murdered as he begins to bloom.

In the few remarks about violence, I must say I felt your hesitation to use violence. Even when you talked about some of the executions you authorized, I felt a certain strain of resentment. Yes, violence against a violent agenda, I agree with you. Life must be preserved, but if that life refuses the life of others, it must be fought against fiercely. But not with hatred but with the purifying power of the struggle.

You know, it is interesting to see how serious you were with the revolution. You clearly said that if an ambassador came to present his credentials to you, you simply asked them to jump on to a Land-Rover and drove them to a village. There you said to him: "Your excellency, you are presenting your credentials to these people, not to Thomas Sankara in the state palace." This shows me how serious you were about listening to the people. You remained accountable to the Burkinabe to the very end. Some leaders forget about the ordinary workers and peasants as soon as they have voted for them. You taught our people that to vote is not only a right but also a blessing. That is what dignity is all about for our people as they struggle to buy daily bread and get shelter for themselves and their children.

Thomas, I will not go on, but I continue to hear the many voices which you gave to the people of the neglected world, the people for whom a Third World had to be invented so that they could be dumped there. You spoke for them in all those large halls and stadia without feeling ashamed about yourself. For many years to come, we will miss you, but the more we miss you, the more we are with you in this painful but on-going struggle,

Your brother

Chenjerai Hove