

Thomas Sankara, Intersectionality and the Fate of Africa's Liberation

Written by Ethan Oversby and Benjamin Maiangwa

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/12/31/thomas-sankara-intersectionality-and-the-fate-of-africas-liberation/>

ETHAN OVERSBY AND BENJAMIN MAIANGWA, DEC 31 2022

Thomas Sankara is relevant today as a Marxist revolutionary, and a martyr to those inspired by his subaltern resistance to what bell hooks calls the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy”; an “interlocking system of domination” that exist between the west and the rest of the world. Sankara’s legacy is particularly felt among the younger generation in Africa and elsewhere who are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with exploitative capitalism, the kleptocracy of their leaders and other planetary crises.

Thomas Sankara was born in December 21, 1949 in French Colonial Upper Volta, a small landlocked country, like the nearly one-third of the entire continent that have had to live with the burden of the arbitrary mapping of their communities at the Berlin Conference (1884–5). Sankara became politically active whilst in the military and his oration made him popular among the citizens. He capitalized on this popularity and staged a successful coup in August 1983, becoming the President of Upper Volta. Despite the leftist support and wide regional acclamation that he garnered in Africa and among other leftists’ regimes elsewhere, Sankara lacked international backing. But he remained resolute in his decolonial ways. He understood that Africa’s development had to come both from internal transformation and opposition to corrupt forces, as well as resistance and untrammelled freedom from imperialism, “severing the lines of economic and political slavery with the North.”

In what would be his first act at cutting ties with the colonizers and making his country self-sufficient, Sankara changed the name of the country from Upper Volta (which was a name given by France) to Burkina Faso or the land of the upright or incorruptible people. The name was formulated from the two primary Indigenous languages of the country – Mòoré and Dioula. The new name was a testament to his vision and hope for selflessness among the Burkinabés who adored him for his grit and charisma. Sankara’s personal commitment to nurturing incorruptible minds and transforming Burkina Faso’s entrenched governance malfeasance and underdevelopment placed him as one of the few “intransigent figures of opposition to the emergence of neoliberalism, privatisation and the marginalisation of Africa.”

However, this positive trajectory would be short lived, because in October 1987, his close friend and associate Blaise Compaoré led a bloody coup against him – aided by a squad of Liberian exiles in Burkina Faso. The military had long consolidated power within Burkina Faso, and some of the top brass including Compaoré were not in accord with Sankara’s progressive policies. This created two main factions within the military, “one coalescing around Sankara and the other gravitating towards Compaoré.” Compaoré’s overwhelming military advantage within Burkina, coupled with the lack of international backing, particularly from France and among other francophone African elite, ensured that Sankara was isolated.

Ultimately, the French government likely faced pressure from individual investors and private corporations that held a financial interest in African countries. Shareholders and investors would have lost millions if the neo-colonial states were to seize the means of production and become self-sufficient. But Sankara understood that his people would never be free unless they were independent in every regard. Although he was only President for four years, his achievements were unprecedented, leaving many to wonder what the fate of Burkina Faso might have been, and indeed, the rest of Africa, if he had been alive to realize his plans.

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During his relatively short stay in power, Sankara cut the salaries of government officials starting with his own, while also replacing the expensive Mercedes cars that chauffeured them around with the cheap Renault. When his ministers asked why they were flying economy he was reported as saying:

Whether you are in first class or economy, when the plane lands, you all land together. When it takes off, you all take off together. So there is no need to waste taxpayers money to have the pleasure of drinking champagne in first class.

Sankara's nationwide literacy campaign saw a jump from 13% to 73% in just four years. The pioneer movement in the education system could be deemed by some as an improper exercise of power, as its purpose was to educate children on revolutionary ideas, but the training was more so aimed at purging avidity, egoism, and egocentrism, in line with the ethos of the country's name. In the mid 80s Sankara became the first president to combat the impending threat of desertification. The documentary, *Thomas Sankara: The Upright Man* reveals how, with the help of his avowed supporters, his government was able to plant thousands of trees. It was an unparalleled accomplishment at a time where the effects of climate change were only just becoming understood. In addition, the food sovereignty action Sankara took was based on the notion that the aid Burkina Faso received in regard to food was firstly unnecessary because they produce more than enough food to feed themselves. This move also derived from his ideological stance that "the one who feeds you, usually imposes his will upon you."

Sankara is often characterized as "a Pan-Africanist, anti-imperialist, communist, and anti-corruption crusader" – a form of intersectional disposition. Intersectionality is particularly pertinent to evaluating Marxist thinkers, as fundamentally they believe that classism is the ultimate form of exploitation and oppression, whereas intersectionality focuses on the oppression of subclasses, like gender, race, and class. Sankara elaborated that the patriarchal society in Burkina Faso was a product of capitalism and colonial rule, and that Burkinabé men only had sexist ideology because of their underlying social conditions. Sankara's vision of liberating women was also not limited to the confines of Burkina Faso, he recognized that it was a worldwide struggle, a disproportionately struggle for black women in black minority countries. For example, in a speech on women's day in Burkina Faso, Sankara said "We must understand how the struggle of the Burkinabé women is part of a worldwide struggle of all women, and beyond that, part of the rehabilitation of our continent." He made it clear to the Burkinabé men in his new nation address that equality is imperative for the success of his aspirations as he stated,

Though the men have already reached the edges of this great garden that is revolution, our women are still confined within the shadows of anonymity... The revolution's promise is already a reality for men. But for women, it is still merely a rumour.

His emphasis on the liberation of women in Africa was a feminist movement, but also a preliminary understanding of the interjective oppressive concepts of race and gender.

The intersectionality of ideology and race was also visible to Sankara, as in his few years of Presidency he was vocal to other African leaders that watched as their people starved while they remain eternally yoked in a colonial mindset and practice in what Fanon calls the "Pitfalls of National Consciousness" and argues further that the mission of national middle class,

has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neo-colonialism.

In a speech Sankara delivered in Harlem he spoke of the black people that change their ideology for white validation and better treatment when he said, "...certain blacks are afraid and prefer to swear allegiance to whites." Sankara's criticism toward black enablers of imperialism was one of the major reasons he was assassinated.

Geographically Sankara's relevancy is widespread, accumulating most influence in his home country of Burkina Faso, but also having a large audience in Africa and beyond. His relevance takes several different forms, one of great importance in the material relations in Africa, as since his assassination very little has been done to combat imperialism, neo-colonialism, and other economic exploitations. Within the confines of the African continent foreign

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aid from France persists. The neo-colonial CFA Franc is a currency that is still used today in the former French colonies. In addition to the controversy of forcing independent states to use a colonial currency, 50 percent of CFA reserves in the West and central African banks are deposited into the French central bank. Sankara opposed the CFA system because it was part of the economic stagnation that Burkina Faso endured. The most prominent medium of modern imperialism and neo-colonialism comes in the form of debt that has been accumulated by African nations, a good portion of which is held by private creditors that will not forgive the debt.

A proactive re-emergence of Sankara's ideological relevance was first witnessed in 2014 during a public uproar that eventually ousted Blaise Compaoré after he had attempted to extend his 27-year despotic rule. Compaoré's blatant attack on the democratic process was the boiling point that set off the young Burkinabés. These young protesters were also inspired by the spread of Sankara's videos. Through these videos and other online materials of his speeches and policies, many young people became reenergized to fulfil his socialist dream, even though the French intervention eventually put a damper on things.

Compaoré took cover in Cote d'Ivoire where he was sheltered by the Ouattara government despite demands for his extradition to come face justice in the trial of the assassination of Sankara. The vacuum created by his ouster enabled the organization of the first election in post-independence Burkina Faso. Since Compaoré's ouster Burkina Faso has seen several governments take shape, and eventually fall for issues related to social inequities and pervasive religious extremism. Some of the coup leaders such as Paul-henri Damiba who took power from January to September 2022 invoked the ideals of Sankara as a major propellant for his ouster of the civilian government of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré: "Sankara stands as an avatar of an aborted military-driven radical experiment." Damiba's government also fell to a coup in September 2022 led by Ibrahim Traore, a 34-year-old military man. The recent coup seems like an indication of the people's despondency with the "power of the ballot" even when the military has also failed to deliver the desired goods. Traore promised to hold France accountable and solve the terrorist threats that Burkina Faso currently faces.

Traore's military accolades in the fight against jihadism have won him the support of many, but his association with a Russian militant group called "Wagner Group" has raised questions about his leadership. The Wagner Group operates outside the confines of the Russian military as a private organization. They have accusations of human rights violations within the countries they have operated. So the ideological backpacking that Traore has done off Thomas Sankara's past revolution is adjudged as contradictory. Sankara touted that the military must have political training, or the soldiers are subject to becoming criminals, so employing a private militia without political training ran athwart Sankara's vision for self-sufficiency. Apart from possible human rights violations, the "Wagner Group" has accusations of being a Neo-Nazi fascist movement. Sadly, there are not many alternatives, as Burkina Faso faces hardship no better than they did in the mid 80s and will seek help wherever they can find it.

Within the context of the deteriorating security crisis, climate, health pandemic, and associated economic decline and youth unemployment, we will continue to see a renewed revolutionary interest among young Burkinabés, and on the African continent writ large. Indeed, as Heike Bakar notes, Burkina Faso presents an interesting case study of,

how a long history of socio-political mobilization, the resurgence of interest in a murdered former revolutionary leader, and the digital connections of the social media age have recently coalesced in a successful revolution.

We have seen reverberations and similar events in Nigeria, Mali, and Sudan.

Young people in Africa are visibly angry about the postcolonial economic precarity, a sense of dislodgement from the state's polity and governance malfeasance within a bifurcated global extortive capitalist system with its legacy of racism. In Sankara – like other progressive icons before him such as Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and Murtala Mohammed of Nigeria, or even those that came after him like Nelson Mandela – the people understand that "leadership is not necessarily the quantity of years we put in but the quality of service we give out." But whether this understanding-cum-outrage over the despoilation of their countries would extend beyond the social media frenzy to disrupt the status quo and emplace a workable political community is left to be seen. In all these, the important lesson is not to shrink into what W.E.B De Bois describes as:

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The silent hatred of the pale world about [us] and mocking distrust of everything white [or capitalist]; or wasting [ourselves] in a bitter cry, "Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in my own house?"

A commitment toward a detribalized mindset, belief, and political imagination can offer some pathway or insights out of this defeatist disposition.

About the author:

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