



## Dispatch

# Thomas Sankara: The Unburied Memory of an Anticolonial Leader

ANGELO MIRAMONTI

Bellas Artes, Institución Universitaria del Valle, Cali, Colombia

In April 2022, in Burkina Faso, the Thomas Sankara murder trial ended.<sup>1</sup> The former president of Burkina Faso – Blaise Compaoré – was found guilty of the assassination and sentenced to life in prison. However, he had fled the country in 2014 and since then has been living in Cote d’Ivoire (Al-Jazeera, 2022; Frère & Englebert, 2015; Hilgers & Loada, 2013).

When I read this news, my memory took me back to over 20 years ago, when I set foot in Burkina Faso for the first time. Before that trip, I read that from 1983 to 1987 this country had a young president who showed that significant social changes could be achieved in a short time, if the rulers had the firm will to enforce them. His name was Thomas Sankara, and he was 33 years old when he seized power in a bloodless coup. During the four years of his governance, he organized adult literacy campaigns and mass vaccination of children, promoted women's rights and fought corruption as well as desertification caused by inappropriate agricultural practices introduced during the colonial period (Sankara, 2007, 2008). Within two years, child mortality and illiteracy dropped significantly and vaccination coverage increased (Harsch, 2013; Jaffré, 2007; Ziegler, 2013). Beyond these quantitative results, Sankara firmly believed that the decolonization of his country started from the formation of the conscience of citizens, from learning to “rely on themselves” – materially and psychologically – and from the abandonment of a logic of technological and financial dependence that generated hunger and debt (Sankara, 2007, 2013). To achieve his goals, he launched campaigns to “consume Burkinabè,” to plant trees and preserve rainwater in areas affected by desertification. To mark a discontinuity with the colonial past, Sankara also decided to rename the country

---

<sup>1</sup>This dispatch is the reformatted English translation of a piece previously published in Italian (Miramonti, 2021).

*Correspondence Address:* Angelo Miramonti, Bellas Artes, Institución Universitaria del Valle, Av. 2Nte #7N-66 Barrio Centenario Cali, Valle del Cauca, 760001, Colombia; email: amiramonti@bellasartes.edu.co



from Upper Volta to Burkina Faso: the “country of the upright people.” Four years later, Sankara was assassinated by a conspiracy that brought to power the army chief, Blaise Compaoré, who became president after Sankara’s death and remained in power for 27 years.

When he was killed, Sankara was 37 years old. He had made it his urgent priority to drag his country out of the endemic poverty which was the disastrous colonial legacy exacerbated by the greedy local *chefferies* who, over generations, had conspired to keep the rural population in feudal relations of exploitation. Both the short time he stayed in power, and the internal and international opposition that limited his work, may be reasons why there was no popular uprising after his assassination.

Sankara wanted tangible results in a short time and had imposed them before they were fully accepted by the population. Yet he managed to change many things because of his selfless example and firm determination to impose change, quickly and radically. Caught between the urgency to improve the lives of miserable rural populations and the international and internal opposition he faced, he underestimated the complexity of development processes and the need to create consensus around social change, even at the cost of slowing it down. Those who defended and benefited from the status quo took advantage of this blind spot and devoured him.

After my first trip, I travelled to Burkina Faso several times. I read a few books about Sankara, his ideas, his achievements, his mistakes and the reasons behind his assassination. Finally, eight years ago, in April 2015, following an attempted coup by the Presidential Guard, after President Blaise Compaoré was forced to leave power, the importance of clarifying the circumstances and identifying the instigators of Sankara’s assassination became increasingly pressing.

Sankara’s bullet-riddled body was exhumed in December 2015 and carefully studied. The government that had taken office after the fall of Compaoré first of all wanted to know if this really was Sankara’s body. They dug him out of the grave in which he had hastily been buried, without funeral rites, and to this day, he has not received the funeral due to him. Forensic doctors are struggling to make progress on a body as much putrefied by 28 years of silence and fear imposed by the regime of his murderer as by the condition of the body itself. The expert report on the causes of his death repeats a response as well-known as it is generic: “died of gunshot wounds,” and not of “natural causes” as the doctors of the new regime wrote the day after Sankara’s assassination. The ballistics report states that the bullet wounds are compatible with the weapons used by the National Guard, offering yet another confirmation of what was already known. “It is not so important what the coroners will say about whether the body belongs to Sankara and the causes of death. What matters is that the exhumation of the body also unearths memories, induces those who know to speak, before all the eyewitnesses die,” a colleague who worked in Burkina Faso during Sankara’s rule told me. Curiously, disinterring a body also serves to

exhume words, to tear apart silences kept for decades. After more than thirty years, uncomfortable memories begin to emerge, like corpses never honoured, buried under blankets of fear, condemned to archiving and avoidance. Sankara's exhumed body is a splinter stuck in the flesh of a still subjugated continent, a splinter removed from the memory of the powerful, a nightmare for local and external imperialisms, forgotten with relief upon awakening. After 36 years of imposed silence, the hope is that now the eyewitnesses will speak.





*Figure 1a&b.* Burkinabè children being weighed during a nutrition campaign, Burkina Faso (photos: Angelo Miramonti)

Along with Sankara's body, the new government of Burkina Faso has unburied the memory of one of the few African leaders of the twentieth century who rebelled against neocolonialism and disobeyed the impositions of the former colonizers without himself becoming a ruthless oppressor of his people.

He refused to pay the inherited foreign debt, incurred by Burkina Faso's colonizers, also arguing that the debt of Africa's colonizers was more than enough. "If we don't pay, our creditors won't die, we can be sure of that. If we pay, the weakest among us will starve. What is more important?," Sankara once said at an international meeting (Sankara, 1984). It was clear, and to a large extent indisputable. But for the establishment, it was a bad example.

When I think back to my time in Burkina Faso, I realize the extent to which Sankara's memory has been obliterated today: his portrait and quotes are not printed on flags, walls and T-shirts. Yet his corpse, rotten by the oblivion imposed by his murderers, still disturbs the sleep of many.

With the exhumation of that body, his voice resurfaces. The words and gestures that made him, at least for some, an inspiration and an example, are returning to public view. Over 20 years ago, as I was first preparing to visit Burkina Faso, I read about Sankara for the first time and was struck by a man who had a similar profile to other anti-colonial leaders like Ernesto Guevara, Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, but was unknown to most. Maybe it is because he came from an impoverished African country and he wasn't even an orthodox Marxist. Maybe it is because he wasn't handsome like Che Guevara, hieratic like Gandhi or irenic and smiling like Mandela. Sankara reminds me of Steve Biko, another forgotten great leader of the twentieth century, another discomfiting young African, also killed in a political assassination when he was in his thirties and for now unknown to most beyond the continent.



*Figure 2.* Burkinabè youth, between extreme poverty and assimilation to Western values, Burkina Faso (photo: Angelo Miramonti).

Three of my colleagues worked in Burkina Faso during Sankara's rule, an economist and two medical doctors. Their opinions about Sankara differed, some claiming that his death was due to an internal showdown, that Blaise Compaoré simply betrayed and killed Sankara to seize power and that's it. They claim that the French, colonialism and the refusal to pay the debt have nothing to do with his death. They say that this claim is the usual vulgate of the conspiratorial left, which sees the interests of western powers behind every African wickedness. They argue that these are the usual naïve Third World narratives, which nullify the freedom of Africans to at least have the right to assume responsibility for their atrocities, that infantilize them to the point that, when they cause some disaster, instead of taking responsibility, they hide behind self-victimization, throwing the blame on others, the bad guys: the usual whites.

Others, including myself, think that although the intrigues were woven locally and the responsibilities of the local perpetrators must be investigated, Sankara was left to be killed by Compaoré, with the quiescence of those who, in Western chancelleries, did not think Burkina was important enough to stage a real coup, as had happened in 1973 with Allende in Chile (after the nationalization of the copper mines) or in Turkey in 1980 (when it threatened to get dangerously close to the Soviet Union). Burkina Faso was not even worth a coup from the outside. As a country, it was not even good for looting. But it suited the French, the Europeans, and their Ivorian *askaris* (mercenaries) that the captain should die. It also suited them that a docile satrap would succeed him, hungry for a power he was allowed to firmly hold in his grip for 27 years, in exchange for accepting and advancing Western interests in the country, which became increasingly strategically relevant after Sankara's death as a location from which to control migration routes towards Europe and to fight jihadist movements in the Sahel.

In my view, the strongest support for Sankara's murderer came from Ivory Coast. Sankara had never been on good terms with Houphouët-Boigny, the Ivorian president who held power for 33 years from 1960 to 1993. An African colleague told me that, during an international meeting, Sankara jokingly told Houphouët: "You have a face like an old crocodile" and Houphouët answered him: "Be careful because the crocodile likes the captain (*le crocodile aime le capitaine*)."

The *capitaine* is a fish: it was a pun by the old Ivorian president to tell Sankara that he would soon devour him. Blaise Compaoré, found guilty of Sankara's assassination, was a friend of Houphouët-Boigny, who most likely supported Compaoré's intention to kill the captain and seize power in Burkina. Eight years after he escaped from Burkina Faso, Compaoré continues to enjoy refuge in the Ivory Coast. Moreover, when the new Burkinabè government requested his extradition for several political assassinations of which Compaoré was accused, the Ivorian government responded by conferring Ivorian nationality on him (BBC, 2014). No trial will be possible for him in Burkina Faso, because the Ivorian government considers him as an Ivorian citizen against whom no charges are pending in the Ivory Coast.





*Figure 3a&b.* Rural areas, Burkina Faso (photos: Angelo Miramonti).

In the end, the crocodile devoured the captain and, with him, the hopes of millions of Africans. Thirty-six years later, Burkina Faso remains poor, and we still do not know the truth about the crocodiles hiding behind Blaise Compaoré. That corpse extracted from its tomb asks us also to exhume the testimonies, and



to bring back to present the dreams and hopes of millions of Burkinabè, cut short on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1987.

As I think back to these events, I imagine Sankara imprisoned in the government's rooms, lost in the labyrinths of a power that, before him, had never been in contact with the poor. I see him wandering in the cold corridors of that Sahel institution without electricity, with the desert dust clogging the filters of the air conditioners. I imagine the peeled walls of the ministries and the noisy generators in the background. Sankara died like this: a prisoner of his labyrinth.

Houphouët-Boigny also died, six years after devouring the captain in 1993. He was more than twice Sankara's age and had amassed a huge fortune, the crocodile. Houphouët-Boigny is memorialized in a marble mausoleum in his native village, Yamoussoukro, next to the cathedral he had built on the model of St. Peter's in Rome. The construction cost three hundred million dollars at the time, sufficient to give his country a free and universal school system and to feed all the undernourished. Still, he preferred the eternal glory of that building which challenged the Rome of the popes. Today, his marble sarcophagus is besieged by the lichens of that torrid climate.

Of Sankara remains a hastily dug grave and a corpse riddled with bullets, tortured by coroners to have it confess the identity of his killers. Thirty-six years later, it is time that those who know speak, and that the instigators of Sankara's murder are identified.

Sixteen years after that first trip to Burkina Faso, I moved to Senegal and lived there for a few years. On the beach, I met a young man who sold T-shirts with a portrait of Sankara and the inscription: *Sankara, il derange toujours* (Sankara still bothers). Almost 40 years after the captain's death I hope and wish this phrase remains true. May the unburied memory of him inspire without misguiding, arouse enthusiasms without obscuring his ideas with a too-cumbersome shadow. Thirty-six years ago, the crocodile devoured the captain. Thirty-six years later, Thomas Sankara is back. And he still bothers.

## References

- Al-Jazeera (2022). Life sentence for Burkinabe ex-leader Compaoré for Sankara murder, April 6<sup>th</sup>, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/6/hold-burkina-faso-sankara-trial>
- BBC (2014). Le Burkina va demander l'extradition de Blaise Compaoré, November 28<sup>th</sup>, [https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region/2014/11/141127\\_bfdiendere](https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region/2014/11/141127_bfdiendere)
- Frère M.-S., Englebert P. (2015). Briefing: Burkina Faso. The fall of Blaise Compaoré, *African Affairs*, 114, 295-307. <http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/content/114/455/295.full>
- Harsch E. (2013). The legacies of Thomas Sankara: A revolutionary experience in retrospect. *Review of African Political Economy*, 40(137), 358-374. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42003347>
- Hilgers M., Loada, A. (2013). Tension et protestations dans un régime semi-autoritaire : croissance des révoltes populaires et maintien du pouvoir au Burkina Faso. *Politique Africaine*, 131, 187-208. <https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.131.0187>
- Jaffré, B. (2007). *Biographie de Thomas Sankara: La patrie ou la mort...* L'Harmattan.
- Miramonti, A. (2021). Thomas Sankara, il cocodrillo e il capitano. *Educazione Aperta*, 6. <https://www.educazioneaperta.it/thomas-sankara-il-cocodrillo-e-il-capitano.html>

- Sankara T. (1984, October 4). *Discours devant l'Assemblée Générale des Nations-Unies*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dt7QqBJVQFo>
- Sankara T. (2007). *Thomas Sankara parle: La révolution au Burkina Faso 1983-1987*. Pathfinder Press.
- Sankara, T. (2008). *L'émancipation des femmes et la lutte de libération de l'Afrique*. Pathfinder.
- Sankara T. (2013). *Anthologie des discours de Thomas Sankara*, Kontre Kulture.
- Ziegler, J. (2013). *Betting on famine: Why the world still goes hungry*. The New Press.