

“The Color of African Unity”: The Pan-Africanist Rhetoric and Praxis of Thomas Sankara in the Burkina Faso Revolution, 1983–87

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ABSTRACT

In 1983, Captain Thomas Sankara was hoisted to the position of chairman of Upper Volta’s Conseil National de la Révolution on the back of a military coup, and at once became the president of the small West African state. He assumed office by pronouncing bold promises that his regime would be different than those of the nation’s past, including a commitment to a transformational development scheme that would make the country economically self-sufficient. Sankara, as a self-described African revolutionary, contended with not only the behemoth self-imposed task of national development, but also with another challenge: the expectation that he live up to the legacies of Africa’s past post-colonial revolutionaries—many of whom were out of power by the time of his ascension. During his short reign, from 1983 to 1987, he would not only re-name the nation to Burkina Faso and launch massive programs to ameliorate the underdevelopment that plagued rural areas, but also made concerted efforts to build upon the ideals of Pan-Africanism on a continent where political agency was uneven and uncertain. This article analyzes how, from the mantle of a poor, aid-dependent country, Sankara approached the project of discursively and materially advancing Pan-Africanism. This article concludes that Sankara’s rhetoric, endogenous development, and international policy promoted a specific brand of Pan-Africanism that privileged solidarity with working-class Africans at the expense of inter-governmental harmony. Simultaneously, the material reality of Burkina Faso’s capacity limited his substantive efforts to those that affected continental Pan-African influence, rather than international connections with the diaspora.

Keywords: Thomas Sankara, Pan-Africanism, development, neocolonialism, Burkina Faso

Introduction

In early August of 1983, a small group of young military generals and soldiers marched from the town of Pô, Upper Volta to the nation’s capital of Ouagadougou. There, they carried out a scene that had become almost commonplace in the country’s short history: they overthrew the government. Led by a commander named Blaise Compaoré, they descended on the capital with two goals: the first was to free the popular military captain and former prime minister Thomas Sankara from his house arrest, and the second was to march to the residence of then-President Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo and depose him. Arriving after weeks of massive anti-government protests by students and unionists, the coup plotters faced little resistance. By day’s end they had achieved both priorities (Brittain 1985, 44–45). By night’s end, the group had named the freed prisoner Sankara as chairman of their Conseil National de la Révolution (CNR, or National

Revolutionary Council) and declared the council the supreme organ of the state (Skinner 1988e, 443).

The second half of the twentieth century was a time of upheaval—for better and for worse—on the continent of Africa. West Africa, in particular, experienced two decades of tumultuous change in the 1950s and 1960s, when sixteen territories subjected to European colonization since the nineteenth century became “free” nations by way of violent struggle, negotiation, and capitulation of European powers (Birmingham 1995, 25). Still, in the wake of freedom followed decades of neocolonialism, in which former African colonies were tied economically and culturally to their European colonizers and remained in relationships of subordination propped up by elite African leaders. One Sahelian¹ nation suffered under this burden to perhaps the greatest extent of them all: the small, landlocked, and perennially impoverished nation of Upper Volta. Between 1960, the year it gained independence from France, and 1983, the year of the August revolution, it was a nation totally dependent on foreign aid for survival and severely affected by drought and famine (Brittain 1985, 41–42). There were four post-independence heads of state prior to Captain Thomas Sankara, all of whom rose to power on the back of coups d'état. Although the scene that lifted Sankara to power was a near mimicry of the ascendance of his predecessors, he took office promising that his leadership would be anything but. In his first large national address, he told the people of Upper Volta over the radio, in unequivocal terms, that his government would carry out a “struggle against the subjugation of [their] country, and for the freedom, dignity, and progress of [their] people” (Sankara 1988c, 32). He would have only four years, from 1983 until 1987, to carry out this program.

Thomas Sankara was born in Yako, Upper Volta in December 1949. As one of the few children of a state functionary at the time, he led a relatively privileged childhood. He attended a secondary school and subsequently a military academy in Upper Volta called Prytanée Militaire de Kadiogo on scholarship (Harsch 2014, 8–10). It was at this military academy, under the instruction of the then-secretive leftist Adama Touré, that Sankara was purportedly first exposed to anti-imperial, anti-capitalist, and revolutionary thinking (Harsch 2014, 10). After the academy, Sankara continued his military training when he was sent to Madagascar, another former French colony, to attend officers' school. During his stay in Madagascar, he personally witnessed a military that worked in lockstep with the people on civilian development projects, and saw a popular uprising unfold in the streets of the capital city when the Malagasay Revolution unseated the government in 1972 (Leshoele 2019, 12). He soon after left Madagascar for the Parachute Training Centre in Pau, France, where he excelled as a student and sportsman. There, he was exposed to the litany of Marxian and Communist ideas in Paris, a hotbed for radical thinkers in Europe. After returning to Upper Volta in 1974, he became involved in radical student politics, including associating with the Organisation Communiste Voltaïque (OCV, or Voltaic Communist Organization) (Willikins 1989, 378–79). Thus, he was transformed from an apolitical military functionary—who participated in neither the Upper Volta coup earlier in his life nor the Malagasay Revolution—into a radical thinker with ambitions to change the course of history in his country.

Sankara led Burkina Faso from August 1983 until 1987, when he was assassinated and overthrown by his once co-conspirator Blaise Compaoré in another coup. He is significant

¹ The adjective “Sahelian” denotes the countries of the Sahel, an ecoregion that straddles the Sahara Desert to the north and wooded grassland savannahs to the south and stretches from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean on the African continent.

among post-independence African leaders for two reasons. The first is his sweeping agenda to overhaul the society he encountered when he entered office. Symbolically, he renamed the country from Upper Volta to Burkina Faso in 1984 (Willikins 1989, 376). More substantially, he launched massive campaigns focused on civil service reorganization, public health, literacy, environmental protection, and agricultural reform to empower the poorest of the Burkinabé and advance the nation toward self-sufficiency (Leshoele 2019, 19–24). The second reason involves his positionality in the history and intellectual lineage of Third World revolutionaries. Sankara was notably well versed in the theories of Marx and Lenin, which guided his agenda (Leshoele 2019, 61). However, he also came to power at a time after the death, overthrow, or otherwise demise of the giants of African independence, and at a time when revolutionary movements the world over were waning. He was famously a great friend to Fidel Castro of Cuba and Muammar Gaddafi of Lybia, as well as an ardent admirer of Argentina’s Che Guevara (Leshoele 2019, 51–53). He was, from the time of his ascension, directly compared to post-independence African leaders such as Patrice Lumumba of Congo and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, as well as giants of Pan-Africanism such as Kwame Nkrumah (Skinner 1988e, 439). Sankara was a twentieth-century revolutionary with the benefit of hindsight on many of the twentieth century’s revolutions. He attempted to shape history as both a contemporary and descendant of those revolutions. Educated in France and in Africa, he carried with him a multitude of political thought and examples from which to draw.

As a leader, Sankara contended with the huge task of making Burkina Faso into a self-sufficient and formidable state. Still, he took seriously an even greater challenge: making Burkina Faso a force in the world-historical effort to rid the Third World of the scourges of (neo)colonialism. He was an internationalist, as demonstrated by his professed solidarities with Latin America and Palestine (Sankara 1988c, 54). However, in the mold of his continental predecessors, Sankara has also been described by modern African scholars as “profoundly Pan-Africanist” (Gakunzi 1991, 14).

Pan-Africanism is by necessity a generalizing concept debated among African leaders of the twentieth century, and it remains contentious today. There are several “schools” of Pan-Africanist thought, which are defined by Leshoele (2019). Sub-Saharan Pan-Africanism is an ideology that promotes mutual support among Black Africans and concentrates on areas south of the Sahara Desert, placing less emphasis on cooperation with Arab African states. Trans-Saharan Pan-Africanism rejects this reductionism, instead conceptualizing the total geographic unity of the African Continent. Different still, the Global Pan-Africanism popularized by Marcus Garvey, as discussed by Leshoele, advocates for Black unity of the continent and the diaspora, and in some interpretations, the teleology of a single Black state encompassing all of Africa (Leshoele 2019, 75–85). This article examines these various schools and considers Pan-African leadership to encompass those ideas and actions that seek to unite and improve the continent and forge intellectual or material connections within the diaspora that aim at Black cooperation.

Two questions precipitate from historians’ descriptions of Sankara as a “Pan-Africanist” leader, both of which this article will interrogate. First, to what extent could the leader of a small, landlocked nation craft his political ideology to connect with and support revolutions outside of his borders? Second, how could that leader, from the mantle of that small nation, craft policies to materially support the development of Pan-Africanism? Through an analysis of his rhetoric, endogenous development programs, and foreign policy, this article will contend that Sankara advanced a particular brand of Pan-Africanism that promoted unity among the global Black

diaspora based on class solidarity, but was simultaneously limited to material actions that advanced a continental Pan-Africanism.

Pan-Africanist Rhetoric and Historical Time-Space

There is only one color—that of African unity. —Thomas Sankara (1988d, 67)

The legacy of Thomas Sankara is left to history in speeches, interviews, and brief glimpses. He was a man of action who wrote little personal philosophy and only in private. An excavation of his political philosophy must derive from the point where his words went into action: public addresses. In a testament to his character—and a boon to historians today—Sankara was no stranger to frankness in the public eye. He famously resigned from his post as the minister of information under the government of Saye Zerbo with a televised speech that denounced the Zerbo regime and stated his political aims for the future of Burkina Faso (Brittain 1985, 42). Thus, Sankara’s speeches are valuable sources for assessing his grand designs for and conception of the Burkinabé revolution.

Sankara’s addresses and interviews indicate that he saw the Burkinabé revolution as a point in a world-historical and African-historical movement, and that he believed in the indivisibility of the Burkinabé revolution from the liberation of the oppressed masses of Africa. His rhetoric is also evidence that he borrowed from other Pan-African leaders in his tactics to agitate and mobilize the Burkinabé masses. His landmark address to launch the country’s social and economic revolution in 1984, called the “Political Orientation Speech,” which was reprinted and disseminated in pamphlets across the nation, attests to both inclinations (Sankara 1988c, 30).

Sankara repeatedly suggests that he conceived of the Burkinabé revolution as part of a world-historical movement. His address starts by assessing the importance of world-historical developments in the creation of Burkina Faso’s political state. He acknowledges that the phenomenon of Upper Volta’s autonomy, granted in 1960, was a direct result of the French defeats in Indochina (Vietnam) and Algeria. He contends that those violent struggles paved the way for Burkina independence, but in the absence of a durable Burkinabé leadership, also led to the calamity of neocolonial political paramountcy in the post-independence landscape (Sankara 1988c, 33). He concluded his address by affirming that “[Burkina’s] revolution is an integral part of the world movement for peace and democracy against imperialism,” specifically citing the struggles of the Sarahoui² and Namibian peoples of western and southwestern Africa (Sankara 1988c, 54). Ernest Harsch, a historian who spent considerable time with Sankara during his years as president, noted that the latter repeatedly framed Burkina’s revolution as part of a “wider, regional, continental struggle” (2013).³

Peer heads of state recognized the global thinking of Sankara’s revolutionary ideology as well. Fellow African leaders in Ghana, the Congo, and Angola, themselves among the revolutionary regimes in Africa at the time, commended this outlook. Wilkins writes, citing a contemporaneous *African Elite* magazine article from November 20, 1987, during Sankara’s

² The Sarahoui people are Arab Africans in the Western Sahara region, northwest of Burkina Faso, who at the time were struggling to be recognized as the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic, separate from the neocolonial regime of Morocco.

³ Article accessed via *Taylor and Francis Online* and page numbers are unavailable.

early reign, that leaders in these states “saw Sankara as a new kind of spokesman for the ‘African stand against poverty, corruption, and against Western domination’” (1989, 15).

Sankara’s intellectual rearing offers some clues as to why he perceived revolution as transnational. Adama Touré, his academy instructor who first seriously posed to him questions of revolution, was a member of *Partie Africaine de l’Indipendence* (PAI, or African Independence Party), a clandestine group of leftist thinkers that connected revolutionary discourses in Senegal, Upper Volta, and other West African states (Harsch 2014, 11). Sankara clearly conceived of his struggle in the context of Third World history and in connection with contemporary struggles outside of Burkina Faso’s borders, lending his rhetorical weight to international solidarity across the continent—and equally importantly, contemporaries received this rhetoric well.

Not only did he conceive of his revolution as a chapter in a grander story of African collective emancipation, but Sankara also borrowed from Pan-African thinkers to elucidate his theory of change. In the “Political Orientation Speech,” Sankara explicitly positioned the Burkina masses as a people who comprised part of the “wretched of the earth” (Sankara 1988c, 35). This reference to the writing of Frantz Fanon would have only been pertinent to the few who had been exposed to the ideas of Fanon (literacy in Burkina Faso was then extremely low). Still, its function was to agitate and mobilize. To some of the students and teachers at Ouagadougou, the capital and center of education in the country, this was likely a powerful allusion that helped to clarify their new leader’s idea of how revolution must progress and for whom the revolution must fight. Moreover, when asked directly by Cameroonian writer Mongo Beti if he was “taking up the torch” of Kwame Nkrumah as a leader of Pan-Africanism, Sankara replied that it was “a duty of all Africans to continue in that direction if they wanted to free themselves” (as quoted in Tabi 2015, 84–85). His tacit adoption of the mantle of a then-ousted Pan-African leader is further testimony to his willingness to advance a philosophy that borrowed from others.

A salient counterpoint to claims of Pan-African sentiment in Sankara’s rhetoric is his hesitancy to endorse complete African unity with the diverse political ideologies of different African states. For example, he notoriously developed sour relations with the more conservative and pro-Europe regimes of Mali, Ivory Coast, and Togo, actively calling them out as neocolonial and dependent regimes in 1985 (Harsch 2013, 67). He even positioned himself as a threat to their power, arguing that Africans should contend with the reactionaries in their nations (Sankara 1988d, 62), and offering support to would-be rebels in Mali (Sankara 1988f, 147).

This rhetoric posing challenges against fellow African leaders is certainly an abrogation of “Pan-Africanism,” but it did not represent a complete contradiction. Sankara’s conflict with conservative regimes, while ideologically fracturing, were rather a clarification of his conception of Pan-Africanism. He positioned Burkina’s revolution as the ally of African *peoples*, rather than African states. While his challenges to other West African regimes fractured the unity of African states, they reified his commitment to the liberation of masses. As an avowed leftist, Sankara’s class politics permeated his Pan-Africanism. Skinner suggests that ill-advised battles like these represented his inability to contend with the material power structures of his time, ultimately contributing to his demise (1988, 455). However, these convictions represented his contribution to the shaping of Pan-Africanism with class characteristics, not a contradiction of Pan-African sentiment.

Regardless of Sankara’s ability to actualize these ideologies, his inclusion of a wider struggle in his conceptualization of revolution is informative of his intellectual development within the post-independence Pan-African movement. Sankara committed his rhetorical impressions to reflect the place of his revolution in history and reify the importance of his intellectual

predecessors in the formation of revolutionary politics. In doing so, he used his most public forum to forge connections that strengthened Pan-African solidarity with class characteristics.

Endogenous Development with Continental Influence

We didn't make our revolution to export it. But we don't intend to tie ourselves up in knots to continue the Burkinabé revolution inside an impenetrable fortress. Our revolution is an ideology that blows freely and that is at the service of all those who feel the need to avail themselves of it. —Thomas Sankara (1988d, 72)

The CNR faced a behemoth task in 1983, as their leader proclaimed that they would develop one of the most impoverished nations in the world into a self-sufficient economy without help from the traditional capital lending institutions (Sankara 1988c, 50). The council set out toward unparalleled transformations in both pace and scale, true to their revolutionary label. In line with their class-oriented political ideology, the vast majority of these projects focused on uplift for the peasants and poor of Burkina Faso. Although an unlikely domain in which Pan-African solidarity could be formed, parts of Sankara's domestic development program also fortified the Pan-African mandates of his rhetoric by uplifting the poorest in neighboring nations and decentralizing power to acknowledge the differences of "African" peoples within Burkina Faso.

True to his words quoted at the beginning of this section, Sankara and the CNR constructed development programs such that the poorest people of West Africa could "avail themselves" of the mammoth projects that Burkina Faso undertook, specifically in relation to youth policy. The most obvious evidence of this Pan-African strategy precipitated from the CNR vaccination campaign. Sankara's government, in 1986, launched operation "Vaccine Commando," which in two weeks vaccinated two million Burkinabé children against meningitis, measles, and yellow fever (Leshoele 2019, 21). While doing so, the state concurrently provided this vital service to others in the region. According to a reporter on the ground during the campaign, "parents in neighbouring nations heard about the campaign and crossed over the border to have their children inoculated," to such an extent that "many posts had to requisition additional vaccines" (Novicki 1986, 70). This evidence, although anecdotal, remains reliable due to its proximity to the events. It also attests that the CNR carried through on their promises to aid the poor of Africa where possible, expending extra resources to avoid turning away any African with the desire to partake in the fruits of their planning. This solidarity—perhaps from fidelity to principles, perhaps in the hope of evoking mutual reciprocity—represented a material effect on Pan-Africanism in the development politics of Burkina Faso under Sankara's regime.

Moreover, in the domain of education, Sankara's government set out to train students to become good Pan-Africanists. In the "Political Orientation Speech," Sankara noted forcefully that the Burkinabé "must be able to take all that is good from [their] past...as well as all that is positive in foreign cultures," and that students should be able to "critically and positively assimilate the ideas and experiences of other peoples" (1988c, 51–52). This commitment to learning from and along with other nations was actualized in Sankara's literacy campaigns. In a 1986 address to the First Francophone Summit, Sankara criticized but ultimately embraced the paramountcy of French in West African former colonies, praising it as a "means of communication with other peoples" through which the Burkinabé could, "with [their] Africa brothers, analyze [their] respective situation and seek to join efforts in common struggle" (2007b, 94). Years earlier, the CNR had launched their first literacy campaign in 1984, which included French language instruction (Leshoele 2019, 22). This campaign, although not

explicitly for the benefit of other African nations, nonetheless served to link Burkina Faso with its peers in the spirit of common struggle. It is highly likely that the Burkinabé children who learned to communicate in French gained access to literature and communication in ways that connected them with the same ideas and relationships that Sankara himself had developed throughout his education. While not an external program, the literacy campaign represented an avenue to connect Burkina Faso with the West African Francophone world in the future, further contributing to the possibilities of Pan-Africanism.

In a similar manner to the CNR's French language literacy program, the very structure of the government established following the August revolution of 1983 aimed to facilitate greater cooperation among distinct African peoples. Much of Sankara's focus in building a Burkinabé national identity was in fact approached through a kind of Pan-Africanism; he sought to recognize and unify the disparate ethnicities of the peoples bounded in a territory whose limits were defined by colonialism. To understand this nuance, one must consider in context the regional imperatives of "Pan-Africanism"; the people of Burkina Faso, although living in one state, represented a multitude of nations that had been conquered and subjugated by the French into one territory. Those called "Burkina" in 1984 were, in fact, variously Mossi, Samo, Gorounsi, Tuareg, Gourmantché, and other ethnicities with different relationships and life histories (Harsch 2014, 9). Therefore, internal efforts toward better relations between these distinct nations could function as a Pan-African project.

In its pursuit of improving these relations, Sankara's CNR placed an emphasis on de-centering ethnicity as an organizing category and on disseminating power to the people for local enactment of revolutionary activity. Among his first acts of internal nation building was nationalizing all lands on August 4, 1984. This action served to disempower the indigenous institution of "landlords" who held and shared agricultural space with their ethnic kin, unseating "the power of traditional chiefs" (Williamson 2013, 47). Simultaneously, the CNR moved to displace the political domination of ethnic Mossi people—the largest ethnic group in Burkina Faso—to ensure greater ethnic equality throughout the revolution (Williamson 2013, 43–44). From the very outset of the revolution, Sankara made clear, in his own words, that a paramount national task would be to "unite the different nationalities that comprise Upper Volta in the common struggle against enemies of [their] revolution" (1988c, 53). What Sankara espoused in this address was an astute recognition that Pan-Africanism was an internal project of the state as much as it was a project of the continent. The CNR as a national body presided over multiple nations, and internal Pan-Africanism coursed through their endogenous development programs to address this challenge.

One method Sankara deployed to build coalitions among different geographies and ethnicities was decentralizing the decision-making power of the revolution and putting local power in place to lead the national project. Sankara made an open call to the people during his "Political Orientation Speech" of October 1983 to form *Comités de Défense de la Révolution* (CDR, or Committees for the Defense of the Revolution) in towns and workplaces (Williamson 2013, 37). These committees, as envisioned by Sankara, would be the conduits of revolutionary power in local areas and be responsible for educating and mobilizing the population while implementing projects in the manner best for local conditions (Sankara 1988c, 43–44). In national economic development schemes, the CDRs would be responsible for "encouraging economic exchange among [different regions]" and "combatting prejudice among ethnic groups, [while] resolving differences between them to promote unity" (Sankara 1988c, 53). By 1987, there were over seven hundred CDRs in the nation (Harsch 2013). Sankara and the CNR

recognized the challenge of uniting people who had been, until then, relatively isolated and in ethnic enclaves across different geographies—especially in the rural areas. They responded not by doing away with ethnicity, but rather by creating centers of power throughout those rural regions, with connections to and mandates from a national organizing body.

There are salient critiques of the CNR's decentralized and anti-ethnic approach to nation building. Leshoele argues that the CDRs were established too quickly and given too much power, essentially sidelining traditional structures of African power, and thus alienating many people from the national project (2019, 55). Sankara's drive to dissolve internal division took a great deal of power from the main national body and gave it to the young revolutionaries of the CDRs, stripping power from the ethnic elders in Burkinabé society. While the policy may have been expeditious for implementing reforms with haste, it simultaneously upset the balance of long pre-existing power structures, rather incorporating those structures into the national effort. The CDRs became sites of power abuse and funds misappropriation, which Sankara acknowledged in a 1986 speech—all the while reaffirming that CDRs must be the drivers of revolution (Sankara 1988a, 170–74). The disorganization of CDRs likely reflected the lack of organic, recognizable power relationships within them—the kind of relationships and social infrastructure previously negotiated by Burkinabé people within their ethnic communities. These faults may have been missteps of the CNR and Sankara, or they may represent the limits of Pan-African consciousness and political development over such a short period. In any case, they show that Sankara's approach to non-ethnic internal Pan-Africanism was insufficient. This nation-building strategy was unique among contemporary nations, and thus provides evidence that Sankara attempted to mobilize Pan-Africanism as an internal project for the nations within Burkina Faso. Still, the aim to dissolve and unseat social paradigms so quickly was in some ways a deleterious approach to the challenge of building a nation.

Sankara's internal development program was ambitious and, in the context of African post-colonial states, enviable. However, the goals of this development effort were not strictly economic nor internal. The revolutionary government in Burkina Faso sought, through vaccination campaigns, literacy campaigns, and internal social reorganization, to advance the goals of cooperation among African peoples. Facing challenges common to other African leaders of his time—health disparities, education deficiencies, and internal division—Sankara sought to wield development programs as tools to promote national and continental mutual uplift. Although they are not without their faults, the ideology and material outcomes of these policies demonstrate that endogenous development programming was a site of Pan-African politics for Sankara's regime.

Pan-African Movements on the International Stage

The anti-imperialist African countries are our objective allies. Rapprochement with these countries is necessary because of the neocolonial groupings that operate on our continent. —Thomas Sankara (1988c, 54)

International relations are the most obvious policy arena in which Pan-African politics can be exercised. The attitude of leaders toward fellow African states—and Afro-descended peoples the world over—is the most apparent area in which one can build material Pan-African developments. However, as demonstrated in the previous sections, Thomas Sankara practiced a specific philosophy of Pan-Africanism distinct from both the antecedent Pan-African leaders and expectations of contemporaries: class-based solidarity. Burkina Faso's mode of Pan-Africanist

engagement with the international community during the years of the revolution also followed this framework. Sankara's Pan-Africanism was not merely trade- or state- based, but rather focused on fortifying a unifying ideology for the African continent and seeking to solidify a universal anti-imperial sentiment for the purpose of liberation. He lobbied for this anti-imperial positionality through leveraging the common African interests of anti-apartheid activism and debt refusal.

The most prominent African issue for which Sankara wielded his power to encourage African cooperation was the problem of the apartheid regime in South Africa. In one of his earliest press conferences to the nation—doubtless seen by other peoples and leaders around Africa—Sankara insisted that “racist South Africa will always be a thorn in Africa's side” (1988d, 68). He posited that the question of apartheid was not a national one within South Africa, but rather a continental issue with which all African states had to contend. This framing is consistent with Sankara's specific conception of Pan-Africanism aimed at liberating the most oppressed.

Putting this commitment into action, Sankara led Burkina Faso to a boycott of all South African goods as well as the Shell petroleum company due to their dealings with the apartheid regime, in addition to demanding unity with South Africa from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) (Harsch 2014, 64–65). These boycotts represented some of the only material entreaties that Sankara could make on the part of international Pan-Africanism due to the limited power of Burkina Faso as a small and poor nation. He argued that the OAU was to blame for the death of Samora Machel, leader of the Mozambiquan Liberation Front, allegedly at the hands of the apartheid regime, because other African states did not provide support to him (Tabi 2015, 92). He prioritized anti-apartheid action, but still Burkina Faso could not provide sufficient material support on its own. Resistance to and pressure on the apartheid regime was a key facet of his international strategy, but there was little beyond economic pressure that they could provide as a nation. Still, what Sankara contributed to African political discourse was a strong voice to argue that Africa should be united around these common interests—of the frontline states for protection of the rest of the continent, and of Black South Africans for liberation from second-class citizenship. As opposed to advancing arguments for development or commerce, Sankara focused on promoting collective action for liberation.

This paradox captures well the value and limitations of Sankara's continental Pan-African practice. As a leader, he was constantly vigilant of liberation for the most oppressed of Africa, but beyond beseeching other states to join his efforts, he could provide little material impact. What impact he was able to offer was confined to the continent itself.

Additionally, Sankara's international Pan-Africanism was substantially based in anti-neocolonial action as a guiding priority for African unity. As the president of Burkina Faso, and eminently concerned with neocolonial economic exploitation, Sankara sought to leverage the common interests of African nations to build a coalition that could present a united front against debt repayment to Western creditors. In 1987, he spoke about this vision to heads of state at the OAU summit in no uncertain terms, saying: “We cannot repay the debt because we have nothing to pay it with. We cannot repay the debt because it is not our responsibility. We cannot repay the debt because, on the contrary, the [Western nations] owe us something that the greatest riches can never repay—a debt of blood. It is our blood that is shed” (Tabi 2015, 89). Sankara also posited to a summit of the Nonaligned Movement states that Burkina Faso could not reject the debt alone, and that at least fifteen nations would have to join in for them to “successfully resist and win” (1988b, 190–91).

This represented Sankara's only significant effort to build a united coalition with other African states to resist Western influence. The terms and language with which he imagined such a coalition are informative. Sankara was concerned with creating Pan-African solidarity, with the goal of reducing neocolonial influence on the continent. He leveraged the common experience of African states—exploitation at the hands of Western states and the Bretton Woods institutions—to influence other leaders toward anti-colonial action. He referenced the brutality of those actors toward all Africans as the basis on which African states should be united and feel vindicated for posing such resistance. The coalition never materialized, but the proposal demonstrates Sankara's international Pan-Africanist goals: to unite the states of the continent toward an end of African autonomy and independence, free from the influence of neocolonialism. The class and economic characteristics of his ideology were consistent.

The quintessential demonstration of Sankara's vision for Pan-Africanism on the continent was his relationship to the OAU. He was a supporter of the organization, exclaiming its potential, but he simultaneously remained critical of the states he believed were counterrevolutionary. Sankara stated in 1984 that he welcomed “the crisis of redefining priorities” for the OAU (1988d, 65). The “crisis” was that of tensions between progressive governments and conservative, neocolonial regimes. His priority was not uniting African nations with divergent interests, but advancing a unified front of African states dedicated to dismantling colonial legacies. He did not see all African states or peoples as equally relevant to the revolution; he prioritized uplift of the poor and the power of the left-leaning states (Sankara 1988f, 147). His Pan-Africanism was conditional on a specific politics of Africa.

Sankara's international politics were visionary, yet constrained. As the leader of a small nation, he focused his efforts on leveraging the common interests of African nations to blaze a trail for cooperation, rather than contributing to change with the largesse of his state's coffers. This choice was a practical one, but ultimately meant that the extent of his material Pan-Africanist efforts would remain on the continent, where his ideas could directly affect and influence other peoples. By taking strong stances on anti-apartheid action and beseeching his fellow Africans to reject the position of the neocolony, he attempted to unseat the legitimacy of conservative and neocolonial regimes. In doing so, Sankara created a conception of Pan-Africanism that was not for African states or leaders, but for African peoples.

Conclusion

Thomas Sankara's reign was a time of both jubilation and toil for the people of Burkina Faso, in line with their leader's conception of revolution. It was a period shaped metaphorically by the intellectual heritage of Sankara, and literally by the hands of the Burkinabé people. Sankara both borrowed from early- and mid-twentieth-century Pan-African politics, left unfinished by his predecessors, and changed the possibilities of Pan-Africanism with the rhetoric and policies he deployed. Leshoele argues that the African leaders of today can and should borrow from Sankara's practice because it was so generative in reforming the movement at a time when it was waning (2019, 236–39). As a head of state for only four years, he veritably changed for posterity the principles of the Pan-African movement by demonstrating what it could be—and simultaneously how it is limited.

When Sankara assumed power, “Burkina Faso was regarded as little more than a remote backwater...a labour reserve of young, able-bodied men” (Harsch 2013). By the time he was assassinated, his promises and actions were feared by the (neo)colonizers he fought against. To be sure, this was because Sankara made strides in proving the possibilities for African self-

sufficiency with socialist characteristics amidst the political pressures of the Cold War. However, it was undoubtedly also because he expanded the possibilities for togetherness among “the wretched of the earth.” His influence remains palpable today. The youth of Burkina Faso who took to the streets to overthrow Blaise Compaoré in 2014 chanted Sankara’s slogans, clearly referencing the better futures he had imagined, and which African leaders since his demise have failed to realize (Harsch 2013).

Captain Thomas Sankara, through his political rhetoric, endogenous development projects, and international politics positioned the people of a tiny, landlocked nation as “heirs of all the world’s revolutions” (Sankara 2007, 70). Thinking globally, but constrained locally, he both revived the ideas of Pan-Africanism’s past and reconstructed the possibilities of Pan-Africanism’s potential as a movement for the liberation of the most oppressed.

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