

Mediated Sankarism: Reinventing a Historical Figure to Reimagine the Future

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Abstract: Thomas Sankara contributed significantly to the formation of the modern national identity of post-independent Burkina Faso before his assassination in 1987. This essay uses discourse analysis to examine the emergence of Sankara's ideology also known as Sankarism and his praxis in the Burkinabe public discourse. It discussed different creative ways that Burkinabe media users are employing to reinvent Thomas Sankara and Sankarism in attempt to reimagine their future. In the current Burkinabe socio-political context of a nascent democracy characterized by the emergence of active civil society movements and multiple political factions contesting the right to govern and claiming the capacity to provide a new direction to a country caught up amid local and global issues, the reinvention and re-appropriation of Sankarism call for an appropriate close examination. This paper is not so much about who Sankara was or did, but how he is now referenced and remembered. The author contends that in Burkina Faso, new media provide multiple trajectories through which Sankarism is creatively re-invented to construct a national ethos and participate in the contested exercise of state-making.

Introduction

Thomas Sankara (1949-1987) is one of the most famous political figures in contemporary African history.¹ He served as President of Burkina Faso (formerly known as Upper Volta) from 1983 to 1987 when he was assassinated in a military coup led by Blaise Compaoré who became his successor. Sankara's pragmatic and ambitious agenda for his country and Africa, together with his eloquent speeches at international forums propelled him into the spotlights of the Cold War international politics and discourses. Three decades after his death, Sankara is now celebrated and often remembered with deep sorrow among people who are familiar with his pragmatic pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist ideology also known as Sankarism. Nevertheless prior to his newly recovered fame, his image had gradually been eclipsed from the Burkinabe official records and media. At the international level, even though Sankara was a major figure in post-independence Africa and a strong voice of the non-aligned movement during the Cold War, scholars have scantily documented his life and legacy.

In the wake of the Burkinabe 2014 popular revolution, however, which ousted Sankara's successor, many scholars have started to look back into Sankara's ideological legacy and what it could mean today. For instance, in June 2016 the *Journal of Pan African Studies* featured a call for papers "aim[ing] to bring forward the different ways in which activists, theorists and writers in and beyond Africa have engaged with Sankara's political philosophies and praxis since his

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v18/v18i1a2.pdf>

assassination in 1987.”² Naturally, in Burkina Faso, the ousting of his successor Blaise Compaoré has offered multiple opportunities for people to talk openly about Sankara and to freely display his images in the public sphere. This essay seeks to discuss Sankarism in current Burkinabe popular political discourse and media and to contextualize its significance and contribution to African thought. Such discourses are selected from messages in underground protest music as well as common people’s online discussions about Sankara and what he means to them today. The paper is structured to ask two questions. First, how significant was Sankara’s role in the emergence of the modern Burkinabe national identity? Second, what are the trajectories through which Sankara and his ideology are re-invented and re-appropriated to negotiate the construction of a national ethos within the current contested political landscapes of Burkina Faso?

Cyber Sankarism and the Public Discourse

Thomas Sankara’s fandom is now a growing phenomenon among Internet users in Burkina Faso. From beyond the grave, his identity has risen up to own multiple Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. For instance, there are over one hundred Twitter accounts with some variety of the handle @ThomasSankara. These are all accounts from various parts of the world that tweet about Sankara. Also, his pan-Africanist philosophy of unity, independence, and progress is also prominently praised on many other social media accounts and websites, which share contents about him, hence providing a space where thousands of followers and visitors interact daily. In the Burkinabe cyberspace, Thomas Sankara has become a “hot topic, “ especially among the youth who claim his ideology. This phenomenon now transcends the collective online subculture to become more visible in the everyday discourse of both the common people and the aspiring political leaders in Burkina Faso. For example, young musician Patrick Kabré states:

I do not claim inheritance of Thomas Sankara. And to be precise, I do not care about the man himself, but, rather the words that he carried. I noticed that he did not speak for himself; it is as if he were incarnating the people, and that the desires, wills, and aspirations of the people were animated in the body and energy of one man. That is what I claim.³

Kabré is not an outlier in his sympathetic attitude towards Thomas Sankara’s memory online. He certainly embodies what most online Sankarists seem to do: spreading important quotes and ideas attributed to Sankara and making him well known to whomever cares to read. Many other people are posting similar items online. Mr. X, the author of a website that curates content about Thomas Sankara offers that “Like all the Burkinabe of my age, I did not have the chance to know Captain Sankara. This website was the fruit of the passion this man and his works nourished in me.”⁴ Benewende S. Sankara, a 2015 presidential candidate and a longtime opposition leader campaigned with Sankara’s slogans. Not only did Benewende define his political party as a Sankarist party, but he projected himself as an embodiment of Sankara’s ideal: “We are the heirs of Thomas Sankara. We will continue to revive his legacy by using the rigor at the level of governance. If we come to power, the first thing we shall do is restore the authority of the state.”⁵

From top politicians seeking presidential election to lay people, sympathy and nostalgia about Thomas Sankara abound among most Burkinabe internet users. Some of these neo-Sankarists such as Mr. X and Patrick Kabré have even materialized their feelings about Sankara in their work. The former built a website and is now collaborating with Bruno Jaffré, an author of a Sankara biography, to curate contents about Sankara and to make him better known to the rest of the world. The latter has made his commitment to singing music composed about his idol. These forms of enthusiasm for Sankara's ideology, several decades after his death, constitute the object of reflection in this essay.

However, while most people look up to Sankara and his ideological legacy as an alternative social project, I have not found a consistent definition of Sankarism through my research. Sankarism clearly means different things to different people. Bruno Jaffré rightly observed that Sankarism remains a loosely defined concept which needs much more critical studies.⁶ Therefore, in this essay I keep a broader and more general understanding of Sankarism as being the people's general perception and understanding of patriotism, pan-Africanism, and their rejection of neo-imperialism as embodied in Sankara's life and work. Even so, recent popular re-adoptions of this ideology in new media arouse much interest in this essay. For instance, in the 2015 presidential election, Sankara and Sankarism became visible and ubiquitous in campaign discourses, promises, and media. Dr. Abdoulaye Soma, a close observer of Burkinabe politics, reported, "all the candidates try to emulate Thomas Sankara ... everyone wants to take ownership of the October insurrection, which was largely imbued with the Sankarist ideals."⁷ Even political parties that were known to be close to the outgoing regime such as the MPP utilized some popularly renowned Sankara slogans hoping to secure votes.⁸ Sankara looms large in the social imagination of most Burkinabe and the new media offer the possibility of representing such imagination.

Thomas Sankara is certainly not the first historical figure to become so popular in both the imagination and media in contemporary Burkina Faso. "In this country, there are four iconic photos everyone knows. The first is Bob Marley. The second is Che Guevara, and the third is Patrick Lumumba, and the fourth is our own Thomas Sankara," Rasmane, a bookstore keeper at the University of Ouagadougou told me, waving a recent collection of Sankara speeches organized and published by one Simplice T. Sandwidi.⁹ Local reproductions of Sankara's famous speeches with a new introduction are now a basic reading material for most students in Burkina who want to learn about their hero. It is no coincidence that Sankara is remembered along with Lumumba, Guevara, and Bob Marley since they are also internationally well-known historical figures. It is difficult to lay these figures to rest permanently in writings because their memories are now part of African collective imaginations although such memories are often contested ones.¹⁰

Although empirical data to support Rasmane's claims is yet to be researched, a quick ride around Ouagadougou reveals the persistence of these three figures on graffiti, murals, t-shirts, etc. As Theophile, a tailor and a designer told me, "It is impossible to go from one point to another in any city of Burkina Faso without spotting someone in the traffic proudly wearing a t-shirt with Thomas Sankara's effigy on the back. I design those t-shirts and the demand is always high."¹¹ The famous *Faso Dan Fani*, a local cotton cloth that Sankara promoted in an effort to boost the local economy is now an item of national pride for most people, especially officials.

Yet, when Sankara was in office, most government clerks called it “*Sankara arrive*” [Sankara is coming]. Sankara was known for showing up unannounced in some government offices and employees were expected to be wearing *Faso Dan Fani*. People would wear Western-style cloths and keep a *Faso Dan Fani* in the office until word came that Sankara was around.¹² Now, there has been a return to *Faso Dan Fani* largely because of its association with Sankara. There is indeed a local garment economy that is developing around the iconic image of Sankara.

From a Failed Colony to a Post-Colonial Nation

In the current Burkinabe socio-political context, it is the historical figure in the person of Thomas Sankara that shapes the collective sense of the nation. When Sankara came to power, he sought to “build a new Voltaic society, within which the Voltaic citizen ... will be the architect of his own happiness.”¹³ Though the fulfillment of such a promise is often debated among some Sankara scholars, the current popular reverence of Sankara remains unquestionable. Sankara inherited an economically and politically unstable country, which he transformed by establishing the basis for self-acceptance and self-reliance as a nation. He was successful in reshaping and redefining the national identity of Upper Volta, which he renamed Burkina Faso.¹⁴ Two important and interdependent factors illustrate the state of the country that Sankara inherited in 1983. The first is the large migration of its people within the sub-region seeking better arable lands and living conditions. The second is the lack of natural resources and the resulting poor economic perspectives, which contributed to place the country among the least developed of the world. However, over his tenure, Burkina Faso began to show signs of economic and social stability.

From its independence to the advent of Sankara’s regime, Burkina Faso presented all the symptoms of a failed nation. When Sankara came in power, Burkina Faso was not just one of the poorest countries in the world, it was also among the world’s most politically unstable countries, undergoing multiple successive military regime changes and with institutions incapable of meeting the basic needs of its people. Sankara’s short term in office remains a positive transformative moment in the history of Burkina Faso. A few authors have already documented his immense legacy in terms of improving the living conditions of the people.¹⁵ Some of his notable accomplishments include his investment in education, his unprecedented fight against the advancement of desertification, and his advocacy for women’s rights. His most often-cited deeds include vaccinating over three million children against the prevailing tropical diseases—yellow fever, meningitis, and measles.¹⁶ Sankara’s arrival in power and his political ideology progressively turned what was a failing postcolonial state into a nation with a strong sense of national identity. New national symbols were created and old pre-colonial rallying symbols were revived, hence creating favorable conditions for a true national identity. The name of the country was changed from Haute Volta (Upper Volta) to Burkina Faso, which in local language means “Country of Upright People.” A new national anthem was introduced, and a new flag was invented to rid Burkina Faso of the persistent symbols of colonialism. These changes were undertaken with the participation of the masses organized from bottom up in Committees of Defense of the Revolution. Guy Martin argues that Sankara’s success in rallying the masses behind his cause is, in itself, an extraordinary case that speaks to how his neo-Marxist ideology was in line with the needs and aspirations of his people. He fulfilled the

people's desire to renounce the stain of colonialism and the weight of post-colonial economic and cultural exploitation. That is what Martin reported as "a higher stage of development in the Burkinabe society."¹⁷ Perhaps, this common history is what allows the Burkinabe youth today to imagine a different Burkina Faso.

After Sankara's death, however, his image was discontinued in the public sphere. Sankara was not taught in Burkinabe schools and very little reference was ever made about him in official public discourse during the twenty-seven years following his assassination. Any physical reference to him was erased in the cities and towns of the country. As one would expect, the Compaoré military regime tried to convince the Burkinabe and the international community that Sankara had betrayed the democratic ideals and that having Sankara's iconography around was counterproductive. In fact, the Compaoré regime sought to literally bury Sankara along with his revolutionary ideas. So one might wonder where the persistent memory of Sankara comes from, considering that most of the people who now claim Sankara's ideology were born after his death or were very young during his years in power. Clearly, reference and reverence of Sankara among the Burkinabe youth are not based on a direct memory of him but rather from a "creative imagination" which stems partly from the failures of Compaoré's regime to meet the people's need for freedom, autonomy, citizenship, and self-direction. Also, Sankara has continued to exist in the private spaces and in the collective imagination of the people. For instance, while Compaoré's effigies were ever present in offices and schools around the country, images of Thomas Sankara remained in homes.

Sankarism in the Modern State

Over his three-decade rule, President Compaoré successfully established a respected image of himself abroad. At home, he favored the creation of a political sphere with a multiparty system while simultaneously limiting the potentially subversive character of that public space.¹⁸ His outward looking politics and his internal use of political clientelism allowed him to maintain absolute power for almost three decades. Alexandra Reza reported that Compaoré was a strong ally of the US and France, whom he allowed access to Burkina for military operations and surveillance in the Sahara region. This was a good trade for the powerful Western governments who chose to pay less attention to his human rights records.¹⁹ The twenty-seven-year reign of President Compaoré established an apparent political stability, maintained with an internal brutal force, which international media drastically failed to cover.²⁰

This longevity of Compaoré's regime was significant in erasing the image of his predecessor in the public space. However, when the 2014 popular revolution overthrew President Compaoré, Sankara's ideology resurfaced in the Burkinabe political discourse. First, public-spirited movements have utilized Sankara's ideology as the template for grounding their discontent against governmental malpractices and a yardstick for measuring and critiquing the failures of governmental institutions, expressing dissatisfaction, and demanding change. In that sense, Sankara's historical slogans and accomplishments were wielded as the norms for formulating their discourses. *Le Balai Citoyen* (The Citizen's Broom), one of the civil society movements in the forefront of the October 2014 revolution, efficiently utilized Sankara to legitimize itself as a spokesperson for the people against the dictatorship of President Compaoré.²¹ This heterogeneous social movement was spearheaded by young popular

musicians who rallied the youth across the country through their use of Sankara's anti-imperialist and anti-bourgeoisie rhetoric in the lyrics of their music. Refusing to be spectators of the quotidian despair or to hop into the dreadful routes of migration to Europe, as is often the case for many dissatisfied youth across the continent, Burkinabe pop musicians have sought to critique their government by taking Sankara as an ideal reference. Pop music from Burkina Faso, especially hip hop and reggae, is mostly a medium for political advocacy. Because the dissenting nature of their musical messages restricted their access to public media, pop musicians turned to online platforms to publish and share with their fans. Their *modus operandi* is a combination of strong coded political messages in local languages or vernacular French with embedded theatrical sketches, which satirize the lavish lifestyles of the leaders and simultaneously portray the misery of the average citizens.

Two prominent public figures emerged among the pop musicians who stood as strong voices against government malpractices: rapper Serge Bambara (alias Smockey) and reggae musician Sama Karim (alias Sams' K. le Jah). They have produced music videos praising and mourning Sankara and demanding justice for him. Following their success in music, which granted them stardom and legitimacy in the eyes of the youth, Smockey and Sams' K created and led *Le Balai Citoyen*. This civil society movement mobilized millions of people in 2014 to protest against President Compaoré and his project to amend the constitution and seek another re-election.²² The success of Smockey and Sams' K in mobilizing the youth to protest and oust the sitting president demonstrates that pop music, far from being just a marginal form of art, served as a strong communication tool for mobilization and action. *Le Balai Citoyen*, according to Zakaria Soré, claimed to follow Sankara's ideals and sought a society of justice and equity with the cardinal values of democracy in place.²³ The pop musicians presented a counter discourse that challenged state power with banality and obscenity in their lyrics and their music video performances. In fact, Burkinabe pop music grotesquely portrays the dominant discourse and appeals to larger audiences by framing the sufferings of the people and the insouciance of their leaders through words and images.

Achille Mbembe offered that in the postcolonial world, state power works through the grotesque and the obscene of the governing elite, which creates a relation of "mutual zombification" with the people; a relation in which both groups live in conviviality.²⁴ Oppositely, Burkinabe pop music employed the same "zombification" but only to unveil the shortcomings of the government's work and disrupt the fake sense of conviviality between the leaders and the people. They deployed the image of Sankara and his political ideal as symbols of what the nation ought to be. Music becomes more than a simple accounting of the state of affairs, but rather a confrontational call for action. As an illustration, when Smockey released his fourth album, he titled it "*Cravate, Costards et Pourriture*" which translates as "Tie, Suits, and Rot." Such a title exemplifies the ultimate zombification of the Compaoré regime represented by the rotting body in suit and tie. In the meantime, Smockey's work was a call for action to mobilize morally and physically against the military junta in power. Songs like *Thomas Sankara*, featuring Senegalese rapper Didier Awadi and "*A qui profite le crime?*" (Who benefits from the crime?), referring to the murder of Sankara, became very popular among the youth. Both songs feature excerpts of key speeches of Thomas Sankara in his own voice. Then the musician includes his own commentary that directly condemns Sankara's assassination and calls for

justice. The music videos also show images of Sankara mingling with a crowd of peasants as a way to demonstrate his closeness and care for the poor.

Currently, work to reestablish Sankara's image in the symbols of the country is already underway. Among other things, the new government renamed the military camp of Po after Thomas Sankara.²⁵ Considering the role of the army in the power structure in Burkina Faso, this renaming amounts to a political statement and an attempt to redefine the military deontology as envisioned by Sankara. Besides the idea of providing an ultimate role model to look up to, it reminds that the role of the army to serve the people with integrity.

The contribution of Burkinabe diaspora communities to the post-insurrection political discourse also includes a strong revival of Sankara's image and his political ideology. In December 2015, members of the Burkinabe diaspora in Germany created the "*Prix Sankara de l'Innovation*" to honor any person or group of persons who come up with innovations to better the living conditions of the Burkinabe people.²⁶ A similar award was introduced in the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) in 2015 to "Celebrate the Pan-African creativity and hope embodied by the former President of Burkina Faso."²⁷ All these symbolic re-creations of Sankara have a public dimension, which testify to the political leaders' attempts to reinstitute Sankara's image in the Burkinabe public sphere.

"Kill me and millions of Sankaras will be born," warned Sankara during one of his last public speeches, as the list of his international friends grew thinner because most leaders sought to dissociate themselves with his left wing and anti-imperialist agenda. The Burkinabe youth have taken that slogan to mean that all of them are now newborn Sankaras. Protest signs always bear Sankara's image, but also some of the most striking phrases randomly taken from his multiple public speeches. "There is no true revolution without the participation of women," "Sankara's kids are now grown up," and "One step with the people is better than one hundred steps without them" read some of the signs.²⁸ Clearly, though the objective of the 2014 popular upheaval was to demand social change, that change was envisioned through Sankara and expressed through Sankara's social project.

Further, the host of emerging new media now provides a platform for representing, negotiating, and redefining Sankara and Sankarism. Though Sankara remains a mysterious figure for many of his fans, mostly, because they were not old enough to have known him and his revolutionary ideas, he is now a sort of national myth around whom the youth constructs its dream leader and envisions the future. Sankara's Burkina Faso, in this sense, becomes the ideal nation for most of the people today. The socio-political paradigm, which emerges from the marriage between online discourses and offline engagement, is an important factor in shaping Burkinabe social aspirations. In response, the national political discourse is then infused with the persistent image of Sankara and Sankarist ideology. Prominent actors of the public sphere such as politicians have understood that Sankara's image is now a rallying factor and they formulate their discourse around him. Sankarism becomes a sort of a symbol of unification even though Sankara's ideology is yet to be properly put to practice. As a result, the modern political history of Burkina Faso is a history of hope nurtured by the brief and enlightening passage of Sankara at the command of the destiny of the country.

As we enter the second half of the century since Africa has attained its formal independence, the continent still relies on its former colonizers despite an abundance of

resources. In the meantime, social dissatisfaction is widespread across the continent, as the elite have failed to attend to the basic needs and aspirations of the people. Furthermore, Africans remain the most vulnerable peoples in the face of new forms of global challenges such as terrorism, mass migration, Ebola, global warming, etc. In the case of Burkina Faso, regardless of what one might think of Sankara and Sankarism, the fact that people recollect his ideology and political practices as an alternative solution demonstrates a need for a new model in modern governance. It is also indicative of the enduring inefficacy of the imported ideas and thoughts that constitute a strong attribute of the neo-colonial African governance system. Therefore, Africa's presence on the global stage needs to be rethought with African interests put forward. Since the spirit of resistance to neocolonialism embodied by Sankara and leaders such as Patrick Lumumba and Kwame Nkrumah is still present in the memory of most Africans, these figures can certainly be historical landmarks for reference. But first, the epistemology on and about Africa must be widened to incorporate alternative thinking. The question of African thought and its position vis-à-vis the neoliberal world order remains an important one today and Sankarism could be a useful entry point.

Conclusion

The disenchanted youth of Burkina Faso is reinventing and re-appropriating Thomas Sankara and his revolutionary philosophy of self-reliance and pan-Africanism in their drive to imagine a better future. The elusive figure of the leader of the 1983 revolution was first utilized in pop music as a way to denounce government malpractices and to invite the people for a collective action against the acting government in 2014. After the success in evicting the Compaoré's twenty-seven-year regime, it appears that more opportunities have arisen for discussing and reflecting on Sankara and his role in shaping the identity of Burkina Faso as a nation. The internet has become the sphere par excellence for debating and projecting what Sankara and Sankarism mean. Consequently, Burkinabe political actors are pushed to act upon some of these negotiated ideas and are working to reinstate Sankara's image in the public sphere.

Notes

1 Harsch 2014, p. 10.

2 *Journal of Pan African Studies* 9.3: 218-19.

3 Forson 2015.

4 See Jaffré 2016.

5 Roger 2015.

6 Jaffré 2007, p. 293.

7 AFP 2015.

8 The MPP candidate won the 2015 presidential elections. Its leaders Roch Marc Christian Kaboré (the president), Simon Compaoré, and Salif Diallo were all members of the Compaoré regime before their defection in 2014.

9 Interview in Ouagadougou, June 2018.

10 See Burlin 2011 on how Lumumba is represented in two films and how such media allow for rereading of a historical figure widely dealt with.

- 11 Interview in Ouagadougou, June 2018
- 12 Ouedraogo in Shuffield 2006.
- 13 Sankara 2007, p. 99.
- 14 Jaffré 2007, p. 223.
- 15 See Hagberg 2002; Coleman 2013; Dickovick 2009; Englebert 1996; Harsch 2014.
- 16 Skinner 1988, p. 444.
- 17 Martin 1987, p. 78.
- 18 Bonnecase 2015, p. 152.
- 19 Reza 2016.
- 20 Mathieu Hilgers and Augustin Loada provide a detailed exposé of the semi-authoritarian regime of President Compaoré that was maintained over the years.
- 21 Henry 2015, p. 65.
- 22 Ibid., p. 69.
- 23 In this 2016 report, Zakaria Soré offers the nuances of *Le Balai Citoyen's* commitment to social change.
- 24 Mbembe 2001, p. 104.
- 25 See Sawadogo 2015. The Prime Minister Zida insisted that "This is the model that we want to give our army."
- 26 Some 2016.
- 27 Forster 2015.
- 28 See documentary videos reports by Deutche Welle 2015 and BF24 TV 2014.

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