



Thomas Isadore Sankara 30 Years On: Reincarnation of the Spirit that Refuses to Die

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On the 12th of October 2017 I embarked on a 14 hour trip from Johannesburg, OR Tambo International Airport, to Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso's capital city). The purpose of the trip was to collect data for my doctoral studies which I enrolled for with the University of South Africa in Pretoria. My thesis topic is 'Pan Africanism and African Renaissance in Contemporary Africa: Lessons from Burkina Faso's Thomas Sankara'. This article seeks to give you, the reader, an account of the current state of Burkina Faso based on my approximately two weeks' stay in Ouagadougou, by juxtaposing this with the legacy, vision, and ideas of Thomas Sankara.

A mentor and colleague at the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute often says that the state of any country's airport is often a mirror reflection of the level of socio-economic development of such a country. This observation was given credence by the state of Ouagadougou International Airport which was in a bad shape, to say the least. The landing strip was full of cracks and the weeds/grass had begun to grow with intensity within the cracks. Once we got inside the terminal, I soon realised that there were no air conditioners as we waited for luggage and I was beginning to sweat a great deal. Notwithstanding this, the officials welcomed us with wide smiles in true Burkinabe style. Perhaps it is important to mention at this juncture that this was my first ever visit to West Africa, let alone to a so-called Franco-phone country. Therefore it goes without saying that the language barrier was a huge challenge from the onset after landing because I could not utter a single French word, except *bonjour*. After struggling to change the US dollars to West African CFA Francs used in Burkina Faso, I entered another terrain of struggle, which was to locate my driver, who was the guest house owner where I would stay. I could not locate the driver because even though I had her cell phone number, we could not understand each other because of the language barrier. The good news is that we eventually met.

Without digressing too much, it is important to mention that I finally understood (while sweating at the airport) the caliber of a leader that Sankara was, beyond the rhetoric and theory that I have been reading about him. Sankara refused to have his office in the Presidency installed with air conditioners arguing that he is no different to any Burkinabe and if majority of Burkinabe's can endure the scorching heat in this small West African country, so can he. Temperatures in Ouagadougou ranged between 38 – 42 degrees Celsius on any normal summer day. On the way from the airport to the guesthouse I was shocked by the number of motor bikes I saw on the road because in South Africa one hardly sees a motor bike on the roads. The most shocking thing however was realizing that no-one had a helmet on and I saw many women carrying babies on their backs while riding the motor bikes in a very relaxed manner. Indeed, Ouagadougou is not dubbed the city of bikes for no reason.

Upon my arrival in Ouagadougou city center, I made sure that one of the first things I did was to visit the cemetery where Thomas Sankara was hurriedly buried (or rather dumped) that fateful day of 15 October 1987 when he was assassinated with eleven of his colleagues. I will not, in this brief article, delve too much into the circumstances around his assassination in the days and months before he was killed. While driving on a motor bike to his burial site, it seemed to me that we were going to a dumping site that was long deserted because there was trash everywhere, cattle and sheep crazing in and around the site, and there were 1 to 2 meter long weeds in between the graves (see attached images). It was heartbreaking to be faced with the reality that my personal hero could be buried in such a demeaning and undignified place. Only when I got to where his grave was (before his remains were exhumed for DNA tests), did I realise that as Africans we do not revere and honour our heroes as we should, in state we put other races and nations heroes on a higher pedestal than our own forebears. The cement/enclosure that had covered his remains was scattered all over the cemetery. We later discovered that his burial house (hole) which was left wide open was later used by locals to bury their deceased in the same hole where Sankara was buried. In short, this said to me that the government of the day in Burkina Faso had no regard for restoring of history and memory of Sankara.

I later attended a big commemoration event for Sankara's 30th Anniversary of his assassination (amongst many) that was organised by the Sankarist Party led by Attorney Benewende Sankara. Even though language was again a major stumbling block during the event proceedings, it was

evident to me that the youth of Burkina Faso still took some interest in Sankara's ideas and legacy. This was evidenced by the magnitude of the event and the media attention that the commemoration attracted. Another important event that I attended on the same day (15 October 2017) which took place in the morning, was a protest march that was organised by different civil society organisations and youth movements led by major hip-hop and reggae artists in Burkina Faso like Samska and Smokey (leaders of an organisation called The Broom). The protesters demanded justice for Thomas Sankara and Nobert Zongo (a journalist killed allegedly by Blaise Compaore's Presidential Guard soldiers), by handing out a memorandum of demands to the Justice Department of Burkina Faso. Blaise Compaore was President of Burkina Faso from 1987-2014 (27 years) and he is said to be behind the assassination of Sankara in 1987 at the behest of his colonial masters – France and its puppet government of Ivory Coast at the time.

My interactions with different sectors of Burkina society and leaders indicates that the 'rectification of the revolution' of 04 August 1983 which Compaore sought had succeeded to a large extent. This is because many gains of the Sankara government were reversed (e.g. food security, weakening of imperial forces in Burkina, producing and consuming Burikina products, infrastructure development, organised transport system etc.). The justification for this view is based on my observation of the glaring poverty in the street on Ouaga and given further credence by my interactions and interviews with university students, laypersons on the streets, members of parliament, journalists, Sankara's colleagues during his regime, and bureaucrats across different sectors and institutions in Burkina Faso. Despite all this seemingly gloomy picture of the land of upright men, Sankara's spirit and ideas continue to hover across Ouagadougou and the entire country and continent of Africa at large, because as he correctly observed and anticipated, "you can kill a man, but not his ideas".



[Cemetery where Sankara was buried] [What remains of Sankara's grave] [Where Sankara was killed in 1987]