

# Thomas Sankara Tried to Liberate His Country from the West. Then He Was Murdered

When the revolutionary president of Burkina Faso was assassinated in 1987, his successor prevented an inquest into his death. After decades of obstruction, justice may finally be served

**BY JOSIAH NEUFELD** UPDATED 7:38, MAY. 19, 2020 | PUBLISHED 11:44, MAR. 1, 2019 *This article was published over a year ago. Some information may no longer be current.*



**ON OCTOBER 15, 1987**, a lithe man in a white T-shirt and red track pants walked into a meeting with six of his cabinet ministers. Dressed for his weekly soccer match, the president of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara, was thirty-seven years old, with a flashing smile and a magnetic personality. That day, he arrived at his cabinet meeting in his unimposing black Peugeot 205. He lived on a salary he capped at the equivalent of about \$462 per month. His few assets were public knowledge: a car, a refrigerator, a few bicycles, and several guitars. While many members of Burkina Faso's ruling class were busy enriching themselves with public funds, Sankara

scrupulously modelled his convictions that servants of the state were stewards of the people's money.

As president of one of the poorest countries in the world, Sankara believed fervently that Burkina Faso could learn to sustain itself without foreign aid. He refused aid packages from the International Monetary Fund that, he said, came with strings attached. As he famously proclaimed, "The one who feeds you usually imposes his will upon you." At the summit of the Organization of African Unity in July 1987, he tried to persuade other African countries to collectively refuse to pay their financial debts to their former colonizers. "The origins of debt go back to colonialism's origins," he said, his voice brimming with emotion. "We cannot repay the debt because we are not responsible for this debt. On the contrary, others owe us something that no money can pay for. That is to say, the debt of blood."

The young army captain came to power in a military coup in the early 1980s and launched a radical political experiment unlike any other on the African continent. Sankara was deeply influenced by his study of Marxist revolutions. He urged every village and city in Burkina Faso to organize into committees for the defence of the revolution, local bodies that promote social welfare. Across the country, people came together to build schoolhouses, health care centres, dams, water reservoirs, and irrigation systems. Sankara nationalized all land and invested heavily in agriculture. According to Ernest Harsch's book *Thomas Sankara: An African Revolutionary*, cereal production increased by 75 percent during the first three years of his presidency, an astounding gain for a country where most people were subsistence farmers.

But, by 1987, Sankara's government was also in trouble. Ouagadougou, the capital, was awash in acrimonious leaflets circulated by union and student groups with whom Sankara had publicly quarrelled. He had spent most of the night before that fateful cabinet meeting drafting a speech he hoped would bridge the ideological rifts growing between his government's feuding factions. More urgently, he suspected his right-hand man, Blaise Compaoré, might be plotting a coup. Compaoré, who had once been Sankara's closest friend and ally, had lost faith in the revolution. Determined to root out corruption, Sankara had set up public tribunals that tried nearly 1,000 government officials and civil servants for the misuse or theft of public funds. Many lost their jobs, plenty without just cause—and many of the country's elite had come to resent Sankara's radical reforms.

"Whatever the contradictions, whatever the oppositions, solutions will be found as long as confidence reigns," Sankara had written optimistically in his speech for that day. The meeting had barely started, however, when a burst of machine gun fire interrupted the proceedings. "Everybody out!" someone shouted. Sankara ordered his panicking ministers to stay where they were. "I'm the one they want," he said. Raising his hands over his head, he walked out onto the front steps where his bodyguards already lay dead. As he exited the council meeting, a squad of soldiers who answered to Compaoré shot him. Compaoré later insisted his men had acted without his orders.

The official death certificate said Sankara died of “natural causes.” By nightfall, Compaoré was president.

**I WAS SIX** years old when Thomas Sankara was killed. I remember the event only as a distant rumour from the capital. I grew up in Burkina Faso as the child of Canadian missionaries, theologically conservative Mennonites with a distrust of politics that stretched back to their ancestors’ flight from imperial Russia. We lived in a small village, far from the politics of Ouagadougou, and another change of government had little impact on our lives.

I discovered Thomas Sankara much later, when I was a university student living in Winnipeg. Moving from the fourth-poorest country on the planet to the eighth richest had left me acutely conscious of global inequalities and nostalgic for my childhood home. When I found a book of Sankara’s speeches translated into English, I began to read, first with curiosity and soon with amazement. The eloquence of his arguments and the audacity of his vision captivated me. “The slave who cannot organize his own revolt deserves no pity for his fate. He alone is responsible for his misfortune if he believes his master’s false promise of freedom. Freedom can be won only through struggle!” Sankara eloquently undermined the story I had grown up with: that Africa needed salvation.

I was also intrigued by the man’s symbolic power. I couldn’t help but notice the parallels between Sankara—chastiser of the powerful, champion of the poor, betrayed by his best friend, and martyred with twelve of his companions—and another iconic figure from my religious childhood.

There could scarcely be a greater contrast between Thomas Sankara and the moneyed, self-aggrandizing president who so recklessly grips the helm of the most powerful nation in the world right now. Sankara has been dead for thirty-one years, but his influence has not waned in the intervening decades. This seems an instructive moment to remember a leader who gave fully and sacrificially of himself for the good of his people and has continued to influence the world long after his death.

**THE WORLD WATCHED** Sankara’s revolution closely. One of his devotees was a twentysomething poli-sci student in Montreal named Aziz Fall. A budding activist who would spend more than three decades of his life pursuing justice for Sankara, Fall, the son of an Egyptian professor and a Senegalese diplomat, grew up in a cosmopolitan family. His father was close with Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo. As a high-school student in Senegal, Fall joined radical leftist groups that criticized the Senegalese government. His parents began to worry about their activist son and encouraged him to study overseas.

In 1982 Fall arrived in Canada. Two years later, just after Sankara came to power, Fall and a handful of his university friends formed a collective called **GRILA** (Groupe de recherche et d'initiative pour la liberation de l'Afrique). Their first campaign was to join the boycott-and-sanctions movement against apartheid South Africa. At the time, the Canadian government supported the apartheid regime and, according to Fall, regarded groups like his with suspicion. **GRILA**'s activism put it in contact with the African National Congress in South Africa and raised the collective's public profile. **GRILA** soon had a second chapter in Toronto and members around the world, including in Burkina Faso.

Fall and his comrades watched Sankara's political experiment with fascination. Sankara was a pan-Africanist, an environmentalist, a humanitarian, and a feminist. He organized a tree-planting campaign to push back the encroaching Sahara and a vaccination blitz where, in a little over two weeks, 2 million children in the country were inoculated against measles, meningitis, and yellow fever. Sankara believed girls should get the same education as boys. He outlawed forced marriage and female genital mutilation and appointed more women to leadership positions than any of his predecessors had. He even encouraged men to do the "women's work" of cooking and shopping.

**GRILA** members in Burkina Faso put Fall in contact with Sankara's party, and in October 1987, Fall received an invitation from the Sankara government to an event in Burkina Faso commemorating the life of Che Guevara. Fall was torn. This was his opportunity to meet the charismatic revolutionary he'd been watching from afar. But he had responsibilities in Montreal: he was teaching university classes and had a newborn daughter. **GRILA** was busy organizing rallies and pressuring the Mulroney government to apply further economic sanctions against apartheid South Africa. Fall also couldn't afford the airplane ticket, so he sent his regrets. In Ouagadougou, Sankara delivered a passionate speech. "Che Guevara was cut down by bullets, imperialist bullets," he said. "You cannot kill ideas." A week later, Sankara was dead.

**IN THE DAYS** after Sankara's death, people in Burkina Faso wept openly and piled bouquets and messages of appreciation on the raw red earth of his grave. Fall can still remember his own feelings of grief and betrayal when he heard that Sankara was killed. To him, Sankara, like Lumumba, was another martyr in Africa's long struggle for decolonization.

Compaoré promptly set about "rectifying" Sankara's revolution. He reinstated many officials who had lost their jobs and overturned most of Sankara's radical reforms. Burkina Faso once again became an obedient client of the World Bank and the **IMF**'s development programs—aid Sankara had eschewed in his pursuit of self-reliance.

As Compaoré purged his government of Sankara loyalists, **GRILA** members in Burkina Faso went into hiding or fled the country. Meanwhile, Fall launched an

international campaign to pressure Burkina Faso's government to investigate the details of Sankara's death. Over the next few years, Fall assembled a team of twenty-two lawyers from Canada, Africa, and Europe who helped Thomas Sankara's widow, Mariam Sankara, and their sons, Philippe and Auguste, file a civil suit in 1997 with the high court of Ouagadougou demanding an inquiry into the death and a correction of his death certificate.

For Fall, the struggle for justice was about much more than a single political assassination. He believed that revealing who had orchestrated Sankara's assassination and meting out justice would in some small way interrupt a long history of impunity on his continent. Far too many leaders had gotten away with murder.

Over the next four years, the case bounced from court to court; the Supreme Court of Burkina Faso rejected it on a minor technicality. Thwarted at home, the Sankaras and their lawyers filed a complaint with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Human Rights Committee agreed to hear the case and, after nearly five years, the committee sided with the Sankaras, concluding the state's actions—including a refusal to investigate Sankara's death—"constitute inhuman treatment."

After this legal victory, the word *natural* was removed from Sankara's death certificate, and the government reportedly offered Mariam Sankara and her sons the equivalent of \$65,000 (US) in compensation, which the family refused. The Human Rights Committee closed the case in 2008, but it did not say who was responsible for Sankara's death.

By the early 2000s, Fall was teaching classes at McGill and L'Université du Québec à Montréal. He hadn't given up the campaign for an investigation into the murder. A network of activists, including **GRILA**, launched petitions calling for the French government to open an investigation and declassify diplomatic archives that might shed light on whether France had played a role in Sankara's assassination. In 2007, Fall travelled with musicians and actors to Mexico, France, Italy, Spain, Senegal, and Mali to raise awareness about the lack of justice and gather more signatures for the petition calling for an investigation. The tour culminated in Burkina Faso with an appearance by Mariam Sankara in her first visit to the country since her husband's death. The streets of Ouagadougou were choked with cheering crowds. For security reasons, Fall didn't travel to Burkina Faso. A few months earlier, he'd received death threats—a cryptic phone message, and letters in his mailbox. Fall contacted the Montreal police and spent much of the tour wearing a bulletproof vest.

**OVER THE NEXT** seven years, Fall and the family of Thomas Sankara continued their quest for justice. Doubting that Sankara's body was actually interred in his grave, they asked the courts to order the exhumation and examination of Sankara's remains, but their requests were denied.

On October 30, 2014, twenty-seven years after Sankara's death, furious crowds thronged Ouagadougou's central square, overturning cars, smashing windows, and barricading streets with burning tires. After nearly three decades in power, Compaoré had overstayed his welcome. Public anger had been building against the government for decades. Earlier, in 2011, the same year that popular revolutions toppled regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, a high-school student in Burkina Faso died after being assaulted by police, triggering more mass protests. Food prices were rising and unemployment was high. But what finally broke the dam was Compaoré's attempt in 2014 to change the constitution so he could govern for a fifth term.

On the morning of October 30, as tens of thousands flooded Ouagadougou's streets, my friend Adama Coulibaly left his house to join the protestors, carrying a water bottle and wearing a bandana wrapped around his face to help protect him from tear gas. His fiancée tried to talk him out of it, but Coulibaly wasn't dissuaded. "If I don't go, Compaoré will change the constitution," he said. "I won't be able to tell my children that I tried to stop him."

A university student in his mid-thirties, Coulibaly belonged to a generation of politically active young people who had grown up on stories about Sankara. To them Compaoré had come to represent everything that was wrong with their country—corruption, cronyism, greed—just as Sankara embodied their highest aspirations: integrity, honesty, self-sufficiency. And Sankara's name was on the banners and the lips of the people who stormed the parliament buildings that day.

Coulibaly returned home safely from the protests, but at least thirty-two others reportedly died, most of them shot by the members of Compaoré's presidential guard. But, by the end of the following day, Compaoré found himself outmatched by the people. He fled the country, and citizens celebrated in the streets. Just over a year later, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was elected president in an election widely considered the most free and fair in Burkina Faso's history. That same year, Burkina Faso's transitional government allowed an inquest into Sankara's death. Sankara's presumed remains were exhumed, and bullets were found in the grave, but DNA tests proved inconclusive. The investigating judge, François Yaméogo, issued an international arrest warrant for Compaoré, who had escaped to Côte d'Ivoire.

In October 2017, Fall finally visited Burkina Faso for the thirty-year commemoration of Sankara's death. He remains hopeful that there will eventually be justice for Sankara, but he's not completely optimistic. There is a new judge presiding over the case, and twelve people have been indicted in relation to the assassination. Compaoré, though, is still at large. But the visit thrilled Fall in other ways. He was intrigued by the sight of so many women riding bicycles, scooters, and motorcycles to work, side by side with men in the streets of Ouagadougou. It was something he hadn't seen anywhere else on the continent, and he felt Sankara deserved some credit for the place women had come to occupy in society. "When people unite, they do amazing things," he told me shortly after his trip, "even when they are weak."

In November 2016, I returned to my childhood home. I wanted to look up some of my old friends, including Adama Coulibaly. And I wanted to find out why Sankara still matters so much to the people of Burkina Faso.

Coulibaly was delighted to see me. He has a slender build and schoolboy's grin that makes him look a decade younger than his thirty-eight years. He had just finished a university degree and was awaiting a job placement as a workplace inspector. We watched TV in his tiny two-room apartment and reminisced about our childhood. "Remember that time you helped me work in the fields and the grass left red welts on your arms?" he said with a grin. We also talked about the calamity of Donald Trump, elected only weeks ago. It shocked Coulibaly that a Western nation would choose a president so brazenly immoral and so blatantly racist. I also sensed in my friend a certain satisfaction in the reversal of roles. For once, we weren't talking about a corrupt African leader.

One night, we went to a film festival focused on human rights. We sat outside under an orange, dust-veiled moon and watched three locally produced documentaries projected on an outdoor screen. After the films, there was a concert featuring Smockey, a rapper who's known for the decisive role he played in mobilizing crowds during the uprising that overthrew Compaoré. A burly man in his late forties with a salt-and-pepper goatee, Smockey jogged onto the stage in jeans, a drab jacket, and a fedora. "Ouaga, it's time to wake up!" he shouted in French into the mic. The crowd cheered, and Smockey's band struck up an easy tempo.

While his band played, Smockey reminded the people in the crowd that they were the ones who had brought about a historic change in their country's government. "So let me say that, in all legitimacy, this government is responsible for the security of all. Do you agree?" he asked the crowd.

"Yes!" they answered.

"However, what we're seeing on the ground is serious." Everyone there had heard the news: earlier in the week, jihadist militants from Mali had entered a small town in northern Burkina Faso and gunned down twelve gendarmes, the latest in a string of terrorist attacks threatening the country's fragile democracy.

"In a self-respecting republic, is that right?" asked Smockey.

"No!" said the crowd.

"Then we're going to wake up all these politicians. Are you ready?"

"Yes!"

“[President] Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, wake up!”

“Wake up!” The crowd was certainly awake. By now, everyone was on their feet. Smockey began channelling Sankara, using one of the revolutionary’s familiar call-and-response routines. “Imperialism!” he shouted and the crowd answered: “À bas!” Down with it!

“Embezzlers of public money!”

“À bas!”

“Rabid bats!”

“À bas!”

“Puffed-up toads!”

“À bas!”

“Yellow-eyed vultures!”

“À bas!”

Smockey launched into a rap about Thomas Sankara. As the song neared its musical crescendo, he lifted his hand in a salute. “Show me your cell phones. In homage to Thomas Sankara. I want to see your faces lit. Your spirits lit. Resistance in action. Until all our politicians understand that we want something new. We don’t want to make something new with what is old. We want something new. Youth in command!”

The darkness was lit up by an ocean of cell phones. Beside me, Coulibaly, a wild grin across his face, wielded one in each hand.

Standing there in the crowd, I was struck by the thought that Thomas Sankara wouldn’t have wanted this adulation. Sankara tried to resist the cult of personality that springs up so easily around charismatic leaders. He banned the display of presidential portraits in public buildings and discouraged crowds from chanting his name. He wanted the world to witness the transformation of a people, not the achievements of a man. But his revolution failed.

Nevertheless, perhaps the myth of Sankara achieved something the man could not. “There is nothing ‘mere’ about symbols,” wrote Ta-Nehisi Coates in *The Atlantic* about the historic presidency of Barack Obama. Our symbols tell us what we believe about ourselves, what we aspire to. The symbol of Sankara inspired activists



like Coulibaly and Smockey to risk their lives for democracy. And it fuels Fall in his unfinished struggle against a culture of impunity on his native continent.

The example of Sankara—coming as it does from one of the more overlooked corners of the world—is worth holding up now at a time when moral clarity among powerful elected leaders seems particularly scarce. What’s striking is that just as much has been accomplished in Sankara’s name as he achieved during his short lifetime. In the long run, our leaders are exactly as powerful as the stories tell about them.

Later, as Coulibaly and I left the concert we passed a vendor selling T-shirts emblazoned with a quotation I would have known even without Sankara’s face printed above it: “The slave who cannot organize his own revolt deserves no pity for his fate. He alone is responsible for his misfortune if he believes his master’s false promise of freedom. Freedom can be won only through struggle.”

I started to haggle with the vendor, but Coulibaly intervened. He negotiated a price and handed the vendor cash from his wallet. When Coulibaly gave me the T-shirt, he flashed his mischievous grin, and I could feel the burn of his pride. Pride for his former president, for his country, and for himself.

*March 18, 2019: This article was updated to clarify that a network of activists, including **GRILA** (Groupe de recherche et d’initiative pour la liberation de l’Afrique), launched petitions calling for the French government to open an investigation and declassify diplomatic archives that might shed light on whether France had played a role in Sankara’s assassination.*

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