

Thomas Sankara's Revolutionary Leadership

Meditations on an African Statesman

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Abstract

The notion of a lack of ethical leadership, or what I would term a leadership curse in Africa has received much attention in the last few decades in post-colonial Africa. However, we seldom hear of great African thought leaders such as Thomas Isadore Sankara. This paper, therefore, seeks to critique and analyse what Ren` Otayek terms 'the Sankara phenomenon' that can help us better understand what virtues and traits are required for ethical leadership in Africa. Despite Sankara's considerable achievements in Burkina Faso, his effective leadership style and skills remain under-acknowledged. In martyrdom, Sankara continues to be a source of inspiration, especially for African youth on the continent and abroad. Despite the affection and adoration for Sankara, he is one of the great African leaders who has not been sufficiently recognised, considering the impact he had on the lives of the ordinary working-class people of Burkina Faso.

Introduction

Addressing the 39th UN General Assembly in 1984 in his standard affable and charismatic nature, Thomas Sankara delivered a vibrant, moving, frank and piercing speech. Sankara, who was not shackled by the dutifully diplomatic speeches of such occasions, probably stunned the heads of states present at the session. Talking about the administrative governance approach in Burkina Faso, Sankara broke ranks by explaining that theirs was a decolonised administration of state affairs. It was not a mere change of guard, where white colonial administrators were replaced with black bourgeoisie administrators, who presided over the same exploitative colonial institutions and laws. Rather, 'administrative coloniality'¹ was openly and vigorously frowned upon in the Burkina administration under Sankara's command.² In their effort to 'dare to invent the future' Sankara further explained the necessity of conscientising the military:

... to shatter the administrative apparatus, then rebuild it with a new kind of state employee; to fuse our army with the people through productive labour and with the reminder that without patriotic political education, a military man is nothing but a criminal in power ...³

Like Walter Rodney, Sankara was cognisant of the notion that for Africa to find its long-lost path to development, the continent would need to sever ties with previous colonial masters. Sankara argued that the only way to deal with such administrations was to rupture coloniality completely.⁴ Against such a system, Thomas Sankara understood an anti-imperial revolutionary as being someone who knows how to be modest but is also completely dedicated to the tasks given to him. He or she carries out the tasks without showing off and without expecting any return.⁵ Sankara believed that a revolutionary acts on behalf of the disenfranchised masses of society and seeks to completely overhaul the political economy of the imperial status quo, which exploits people in all sectors of life.

Sankara refused foreign aid that meant the country had to keep looking for more aid, maintained a simplistic lifestyle much like the one he had before he became president, wore clothes manufactured in his country and led Burkina Faso to achieve food self-sufficiency in less than four years. As a self-proclaimed Marxist scholar, Sankara was able to do what many leaders still fail to do: combine theory with praxis, so that the lives of ordinary people are improved as a result of concrete and direct policies and programmes. He understood that revolutions could not be imported or exported. Rather, revolutionaries, according to Sankara, have an obligation to learn from successful revolutions in other countries. For him, this meant studying the Cuban revolution (1959) and French revolution (1789).

Indeed, when Sankara arrived at the presidency of Burkina Faso, illiteracy was conservatively estimated to be at 95 per cent of the seven million people in the country,⁶ life expectancy was low and infant mortality was the highest in the world at 280 deaths per 1 000 births.⁷ Sankara's government was the first government in Africa to acknowledge that the HIV/AIDS epidemic was real and that it posed a serious threat to the health of Africans.⁸ Central to Sankara's governance approach was that Burkina Faso fights a neo-imperialism that sustained these low levels of progress in his country to articulate a new vision of total political, economic and cultural independence. He insisted on prioritising the most basic needs of the masses of the Burkinabè, which was considered quite radical for a president at the time.

Being from a small, landlocked, mineral-deficient country, Sankara's ability to affect such significant alterations to the fabric of Burkinabè society in the space of four years, at a young age (he was in his mid-thirties), speaks to his highly effective leadership ability and organisational skills. Sankara was a pan-Africanist: he did not see the world in exclusively geographical terms, rather, he understood that Western superpowers would always try to impose their will on smaller countries in the global south, which did not have economic muscle in the arena of global affairs and geopolitics.

An example of a disciplined, ethical, visionary and uncompromising African political leader and revolutionary, Thomas Sankara is arguably yet to be matched by any other political leader in Africa. Sankara was a 'handsome, dashing, personable, very much 'on stage' and sincere' person. He was highly charismatic and seemed to be an innately gifted public speaker.⁹ Charisma is often

an important and unmeasurable aspect of leadership. In a political context, it is understood as 'a special quality of leadership that captures the popular imagination and inspires unwavering allegiance, confidence, and devotion'.¹⁰ Ren' Otayek uses the term, 'the Sankara phenomenon', to describe Sankara's ability to 'touch' the lives of those around him.¹¹

He was a self-made and self-taught intellectual who loved books and reading and, when asked questions by the media, he replied while thinking on his feet, often by giving analogies and comparisons. When asked what and where imperialism was, he simply retorted, 'Where is imperialism? Look at your plates when you eat. These imported grains of rice, corn, and millet – that is imperialism. Let's look no further' (quoted in Shuffield, *The Upright Man*). This charismatic manner of speaking was also practical: the analogies and comparisons were easy for most to understand.

Despite Sankara's considerable achievements in Burkina Faso, his effective leadership style and skills remain under-acknowledged. In martyrdom, Sankara continues to be a source of inspiration, especially for African youth on the continent and abroad. Despite this popular affection and adoration for Sankara, he is one of the great African leaders who has not been sufficiently recognised, considering the impact he had on the lives of the ordinary working-class people of Burkina Faso. Perhaps part of the reason why he has not been widely studied and exalted in the anglophone countries of Southern Africa is that his leadership style was unorthodox compared to other post-colonial African leaders. Furthermore, the language barrier could be another reason, because many countries in West Africa are francophone. Elliot Skinner, for example, describes Sankara as a charismatic young leader who 'went against the grain' (that is, he did things differently from his predecessors or the norm) in all he did.¹² Furthermore, because he spoke French in almost all of his interviews and speeches, and because he did not write texts himself, language may have played a role in his relative absence from English speaking schools and the curriculums of other African countries. More than this, two consciously orchestrated actions played a much bigger role in stifling his ideals. This includes what I would call 'the Blaise Campaorè factor' and what some have referred to as the 'fourth branch of government', i.e. the Western-controlled media. These factors reinforced and fed on each other, ensuring that Sankara's ideals and projects (which were dangerous for global capital imperialism) were reversed dramatically and swiftly. This was done effectively by Campaorè's 'rectification' of the revolution, when he liberalised almost all facets of Burkina Faso's socio-economic and political life (see Nicholas Jackson's chapter in this volume). The Western-controlled and funded media in Burkina Faso and France portrayed Sankara as a dictator who wanted to turn Burkina Faso into a pariah state and a failed state through a 'communist' ideology. In an interview with Bubacarr Sankanu, Fidele Kientenga, Sankara's foreign policy adviser, argued as follows in response to media reports of people saying they were tired of Sankara's 'unproductive' revolution:

This is part of the propaganda to deconstruct Sankara's legacy. The imperialists and their puppies control most of the concerned media systems and can create and unmake heroes according to their agenda. Blaise Campaorè destroyed most of the local information that documented Sankara's work. He refuses to open the archives or declassify certain information.¹³

This paper goes against the trend by offering an account of Sankara's leadership. The paper traces Sankara's political life from his school and military service years to his premature death by assassination in 1987. I unravel and explore Sankara's leadership manoeuvres, using a pan-African approach, by looking at his speeches, interviews and interpersonal relationships with his fellow soldiers in the barracks, his comrades and his colleagues in government. I analyse his leadership qualities and the tactics that gave rise to his political, economic, cultural and environmental leadership. I argue that part of what made Sankara such a phenomenal leader was an understanding of international relations, which was guided by a critical consciousness of world history and the positionality of Africa in the world matrix of power (what Anibal Quijano would later term the 'colonial matrix of power'). This matrix refers to the continued domination and subordination of the post-colony in world affairs (the core-periphery power disparity amongst states), which is maintained through a Eurocentric racial political hierarchy of knowledge, culture and politics.¹⁴

Thomas Isadore Sankara was a relatively smart student during his high school years and it was this above-average performance at school that helped him to access the military training that many young people aspired to in the 1970s in Burkina Faso. He was born on 21 December 1949 in Yako, a small town in Burkina Faso. He grew up being acutely aware of and concerned about the class contradictions that plagued Burkina Faso, and it is perhaps this preoccupation from a tender age that led him to join the military in the first place. He attended a military officers' training school in Madagascar in 1970, where he witnessed first-hand the people's revolt against the unjust government of Philibert Tsiranana, a French-imposed stooge in Madagascar.¹⁵ Sankara went on to do parachute training in France in 1972, where his political ideology was further sharpened as he learnt about Marxist theory and world revolutions.¹⁶ Victoria Brittain writes that Sankara first became a household name in the then Upper Volta military in the early 1970s, because at the Po base where he was stationed, 'Captain Sankara organised the commando unit under him in a new way. The soldiers were encouraged to integrate with civilians – they worked together, formed an orchestra and played together.'¹⁷ Sankara also made a name for himself among his colleagues in the army, as well as in the government corridors of Burkina Faso and amongst the proletariats, when he led the 1974 Mali war and helped resolve it without bloodshed. All these accolades in the military and set the scene for his unwavering and astute political service in government a decade later.

In this paper, I distil four key features of Sankara's revolutionary leadership, all of which are indicative of his unique ability to unite theory and action into a grounded praxis that was focused first and foremost on improving the livelihood of people: (a) a servant style that was informed by *Maat*, that is, consciousness that nature, environment, the universe and humans must co-exist harmoniously; (b) an insistence on the agency of people to lead through an engaged political consciousness and awareness; (c) an exceptional organisational capacity rooted in 'thought leadership', and; (d) resistance against personality cults and idolatry. Sankara was a transformational leader, a charismatic leader, a revolutionary leader, a thought leader and a servant leader – all combined. This analysis highlights the continued relevancy of Sankara's leadership style for prospective and current leaders on the continent, who stand to learn from his ethical and principled leadership, which placed the people before the leader himself.

A Servant Style Informed by *Maat*

Sankara's comrade and foreign policy adviser, Fidele Kientega, when asked to describe Sankara's leadership style, said, 'Thomas set the pace for modesty and simplicity in leadership'.¹⁸ Unlike many politicians in Africa and the world over, Sankara, put 'his money where his mouth was' by embodying the politics that he espoused. He introduced austerity plans so that the country's meagre resources could be saved and redirected where they were needed the most. To achieve this, he sold all the expensive vehicles that the previous administrations had used and bought smaller cheaper cars (at the time, this was the Renault 5). He cut his salary nearly in half. He understood well that for the rest of his cabinet and other government officials to have faith in him, he had to show them the way practically, by doing what he 'preached'.

Through selfless acts, he was able to convince his top civil servants and ministers to take a salary cut and to have a portion of their salary invested in development projects. The self-imposed austerity in the form of cutting his own and his top officials' salaries was a demonstration of solidarity with the masses of Burkinabè society, many of whom did not receive basic services. In addition, the fact that his lifestyle did not change much after he assumed power also speaks volumes about his discipline. Sankara genuinely had his people's interests at heart in the imposition of self-imposed austerity, believing that only through sacrifice could Burkina Faso fund education, health and infrastructure programmes.¹⁹ Sankara's self-sacrificial leadership reflected an ethical leadership style. Fainos Mangena described Sankara as a leader 'who also lived an ethical life by embracing the philosophy of *hunhu* or *ubuntu* until he was assassinated by his political emissaries'.²⁰ *Ubuntu* refers to an African philosophical system of coexistence between people that is underpinned and anchored by a social contract and a belief that society can only thrive if we are all each other's brother's or sister's keeper. It simply argues that I am because you are, and you are because I am, which in essence makes a case for communally based prosperity and humanity. Another African philosophy or ethical order is helpful in describing the selfless nature of Sankara: the Egyptian concept of *Maat*.

Molefi Kete Asante explains that the ideal of *Maat* is 'identified with truth, righteousness, justice, order, balance, harmony and reciprocity'.²¹ In essence, *Maat* speaks to balance in life between humans and all that surrounds us, dead or alive. *Maat* embraces an equilibrium and equality amongst people, the environment and the entire universe. This is an Egyptian moral code that provided a general approach to life, much like the South African *ubuntu* or *botho* (the epistemological orientation in which people are humans through other people: I am because you are). Indeed, Sankara embodied both *Maat* and *botho*, because his actions reflected an understanding that he was only as good as his people. He refused to enrich himself and to lead a luxurious life when the majority of ordinary Burkinabè did not have basic human rights and necessities. As an environmentalist who fought deforestation and desertification and a leader grounded in a firm sense of justice and reciprocity, Sankara's leadership style echoes some of the key features of *Maat*. Sankara was a recognised environmental activist because he understood the significance of maintaining harmony and coexisting with our environment because it sustains us, and once this balance is broken, quality of life for humans deteriorates significantly. These are all part of the core features of the *Maat* philosophy.

Much like the order of *Maat*, Sankara was motivated by a strong sense of truthfulness and integrity. He did not hide behind diplomacy. That he was a frank orator was demonstrated time and again, e.g. at the OAU in 1987, and during his dialogue with the then French President, François Mitterrand, in 1986. His environmental policies demonstrated his understanding of ecological harmony (including a project to plant 10 million trees to curb desertification). Sankara was justice oriented. In initiating the People's Revolutionary Tribunals, he sought balance and integrity. Sankara was a democratic revolutionary who fought against all kinds of discrimination and injustice, even when it was deeply controversial and unpopular for him to do so.

Indeed, Sankara's bold policy decisions often went against the political norms of the elite in Burkinabè society. His egalitarian approach was welcome and applauded by women, but initially frowned upon by the mostly male traditional leaders. That such decisions deliberately sought to improve the lives of women, meant that Sankara was not too popular with the chiefs in the rural areas, who felt that Sankara was undermining their customs and authority by single-handedly changing what they believed were their cultural practice. Agrarian reform changed the land ownership patterns in Burkina Faso, curtailing the traditional leaders' monopoly on land control and use. Therefore, Sankara sacrificed his popularity and the support provided by a powerful section of Burkinabè society.

His critique of the petty bourgeoisie was more explicit. He routinely chastised this group for their elitist and exploitative behaviours, declaring that they were 'passive and pathetic consumers, they [who] wallow in terminology fetishised by the West just as they wallow in Western whiskey and champagne in shady-looking lounges'.²² The consumption of expensive and imported food, vehicles, suits and more – goods which were all produced in Euro-America – meant that the African petty bourgeoisie was, in fact, creating jobs and markets for non-African people, while condemning their own citizens to perpetual unemployment. In his famous 'political orientation' speech, delivered on TV and radio in Burkina Faso on 2 October 1983, soon after the August revolution, Sankara used the words 'imperialism' or 'imperialist' thirty-five times.²³ This speech provided a snapshot of his distaste for imperialism in all its various manifestations, as well as his unwavering conviction to fight it. He was well aware that without uprooting neo-imperialism manifestations and being free of its clutches, there could be no self-reliance and sovereignty in Burkina Faso and in Africa as a whole.

Like any radical change or break from the established norm, these self-induced austerity measures were met with hostility and unease by the relatively powerful segments of Burkinabè society. In his efforts to root out corruption and to create an environment wherein his staff members would not be easily tempted to engage in corrupt activities, Sankara embarked on a strategy that reshuffled and redeployed some of his ministers to different posts, to keep them vigilant and incorruptible. Some he redeployed to rural areas that were less appealing to government officials.²⁴ Ministers critiqued these stringent and principled strategies. In the face of criticism, Sankara was uncompromising: he did not privilege personal relationships over the everyday well-being of the Burkinabè. Sankara's leadership style reflected integrity, truthfulness, balance and justice – key features of the ancient Egyptian principle of *Maat*.

Approximately a decade before the August 1983 revolution (1974), Sankara was based in the small town of Po (near the Ghana border), where he was the leader of a commando unit. It was at

this army base where Sankara began diffusing his revolutionary thought. He encouraged his fellow soldiers to adopt unorthodox and creative ways to work closely with the nearby communities. Brittain reports, 'the soldiers were encouraged to integrate with civilians [...] meetings and pamphlets discussing progressive ideas and experiences of other countries rippled through the military as well as civilian groups'.²⁵ This integration of the army with the community was unheard of at the time. These efforts to achieve harmony between everyday people and the military made civilians feel appreciated by their army. The close cooperation and conscientisation of the army and the nearby communities set the scene for what was to be a joint military and civilian popular democratic revolution that ousted Commander Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo's government on 4 August 1983. Through these collaborations, Sankara was motivated by a quest to serve his people as best as he could. He was a self-sacrificing leader, who was informed by a principled comportment much like *Maat*, and who was open to experimentation without allowing predetermined duties to obstruct creative political possibilities.

An Insistence that People Lead and Acquire a Political Consciousness

Merging theory with practice

Sankara was convinced that there could be no sovereignty without economic liberation. He urged Burkinabè to consume *only what they controlled*, so that they could create an internal market for peasants and local entrepreneurs. Self-financed endogenous empowerment was at the core of Sankara's revolutionary leadership in all areas of Burkinabè society – political, economic, social, cultural, environmental and intellectual. Indeed, the conviction that the revolution relies on people's capacity for self-motivation was a cornerstone of Sankara's leadership style. Guy Martin's comprehensive article, *Ideology and Praxis in Thomas Sankara's Populist Revolution of 4 August 1983 in Burkina Faso*, considers the central reasons why the Burkina Faso revolution was successful and why it enjoyed the support of so many Burkinabè. He contends that the relative success of this revolution was due to design and management: the government's policies genuinely sought to involve the downtrodden masses of Burkinabè society, unlike many of the socialist projects of the era. He goes further to argue that those policies were simple in their formulation and implementation, and grounded in a conscious aim of providing the very basic needs of the people – hence the up-swell of popular support.²⁶

Otayek²⁷ adds substance to Martin's hypothesis, reminding us that when Sankara was asked about the ideology of his government and revolution, he tended to avoid explicit reference to conventional ideologies. Instead, he responded that the Burkina revolution was 'neither of the left nor of the right' and that the goal was rather to ensure that there was 'adequate food, shelter, medical care and education' for Burkinabè (quoted in Otayek²⁸; original interview appeared in *Newsweek*, 19 November 1983). In just three years (by 1987), Burkina Faso had achieved food self-sufficiency, the literacy rate had risen markedly, over three million children had been vaccinated in just two weeks against measles, yellow fever and other diseases, and over 10 million new trees had been planted across Burkina Faso.^{29, 30} Sankara merged theory and practice with an unbelievable speed.

Critical Consciousness

Sankara sought to reverse the psychosocial damage and violence of colonialism by setting up an Institute of the Black World/People to end the 'black inferiority complex' (e.g. the detrimental and invisible psychological scars that colonialism implanted in the psyche of black people) and to restore the dignity and self-worth of the Burkinabè.³¹ Through this institute, Sankara wanted to cultivate self-love and self-confidence in his fellow Burkinabè. He sought to challenge the colonial self-hatred that made people feel inferior to Europeans. Sankara was a philosopher in his own right.

Raising the level of consciousness of soldiers was, according to Sankara, a necessity that would safeguard the gains of his August revolution. Contrary to common practice in most countries – where soldiers are just taught to take orders and execute them without questioning their rationality, logic or morality – Sankara believed that soldiers must be trained in revolutionary praxis and the socio-political and economic matters that affect their society, including how these relate to global power relations. Sankara himself was not trained in these subjects at the Burkina Faso military school, but he was conscious of them during his training as a military officer in Madagascar and during his parachute training stint in France, where he met many radical Marxists and Leninists. Not only were soldiers encouraged to learn and participate in community development projects, but civilians were given the opportunity to improve their literacy through evening classes, with the assistance of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. This was a deliberate and calculated intervention by Sankara, who knew that without encouraging people's conscious investment in the revolutionary project (a consciousness grounded in self-love), it would be difficult for people to assist in building the material infrastructure of the new revolutionary society, which required that citizens join hands with the government in working on the ground. The revolution required these combined resources to build dams, schools, clinics and the notorious 100 km railway from Abidjan to Ouagadougou.³²

Sankara was able to inspire and mobilise large numbers of people to assist with revolutionary projects, especially the working class, the proletariat and peasants. Culturally, he was unequivocal about the need to privilege our own African languages and customs. He supported the pan-African Festival of Cinema and Television of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) and insisted that all civil servants (himself included) wear traditional clothes made in Burkina Faso. These policies and programmes had a direct impact and appeal because they affected and changed the material living conditions of the poor. His anti-imperial consciousness raising initiatives reflected his mastery of political strategy. At the same time, Sankara's unwavering conviction of people's ability to do for themselves was part of his servant leadership approach. This is in stark contrast to most governments that want their citizenry to be perpetually dependent on state hand-outs in return for votes, and require blind loyalty to former liberation movements to ensure that the vast majority of their population is either uneducated or miseducated.

An Organisational Capacity Founded in Thought: 'Organise or Agonise'

Marcus Mosiah Garvey once said that 'the greatest weapon used against the Negro [African] is disorganisation'.³³ Garvey's observation was pertinent during Sankara's lifetime. Sankara's leadership and oratory talent resembled that of the great Marcus Garvey. At the core of their thought leadership was the unshaken, uncompromising and principled belief in the need for Africans to do for themselves by being economically and mentally independent. Garvey had established a strong example in the 1920s and 1930s through the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which owned and managed factories, a shipping line (The Black Star line) and a newspaper (*The Negro World*) that had a global reach.³⁴ Sankara followed in Garvey's footsteps by ensuring that his country was economically self-reliant, with the emphasis placed on the production and consumption of Burkinabè products.

Sankara's ability to draw masses of people from different ethnicities and villages in Burkina Faso to work together by building (often with little more than their bare hands) significant and sizeable infrastructure components (e.g. 'the battle of the rails' project that was mentioned in the section above), is evidence that Sankara was not only an exceptional orator but a phenomenal organiser as well. A staunch advocate of women's rights, Sankara encouraged 'women in the struggle [to] proclaim in unison with us that the slave who does not organise his own rebellion deserves no pity for his lot'.³⁵ The Battle of the Rail, People's Programme for Development (PPD), Teach our Children, Irrigation Valley and Reforestation and Vaccination-Commando were among the programmes that Sankara's government initiated.³⁶ These infrastructure projects bear testimony to his incredible organisational skills. The ability to garner the support of so many diverse groups of people, including government officials, was no easy task.

As I alluded to in the introductory section of this chapter, Sankara was also a thoughtful leader. He did not do things haphazardly without first formulating a sound and pragmatic understanding of the policy issue he was dealing with. Thought leaders have an intricate understanding of many complex issues that may influence certain behaviours and outcomes. Vusi Gumede's work on the interplay of thought leadership, thought liberation and critical consciousness describes the kind of leader that African societies want. Thomas Sankara embodied most of the qualities identified by Gumede. According to Gumede, thought leadership:

Connote a leadership orientation underpinned by unconventional ideology, [it is] historically nuanced, culturally sensitive and contextually grounded. Thought leadership – far from and more critical than other forms of leadership – has to be about leadership that is based on progressive ideologies, beliefs, orientations with significant pragmatic and impact appeal.³⁷

Sankara embodied many of these characteristics: his leadership was unorthodox (unconventional) in that even though he was a Marxist, he did not blindly use this ideology using a blanket approach – he tweaked theories to ensure that they suited Burkina Faso's unique challenges.

Sankara's thought leadership was demonstrated through his comprehension of how the imperialist arsenal worked and, subsequently, how it was discharged as a significant cornerstone of his revolutionary praxis. He once argued that imperialism would rather dominate its subject culturally

than militarily. Domination could be more effective and less costly when effected in this benign, yet dangerous, manner.³⁸ Sankara appreciated the powerful potential of an organised and unified Burkinabè society, in which all segments of the population, irrespective of gender or class, would collectivise around the same cause: the everyday well-being of all Burkinabè.

A Pan-African Resistance to Personality Cults and Idolatry

It seems to be an almost unwritten rule that portraits of African heads of states and their cabinet ministers are displayed in government offices and other public spaces. This normalisation of the iconography of African leaders was noted by Achille Mbembe, who wrote about the propensity for African leaders to erase all trace of previous leaders when coming to power, as if to create history from scratch. This iconography extends to the naming of buildings and the construction of monuments and statues.³⁹ Daniel Kahneman (cited in Bush *et al.*)⁴⁰ writes:

Some cultures provide frequent reminders of respect, others constantly remind their members of God, and some societies prime obedience by large images of the Dear Leader. Can there be any doubt that the ubiquitous portraits of the national leader in dictatorial societies not only convey the feeling that 'Big Brother is Watching' but also lead to an actual reduction in spontaneous thought and independent action?

This assertion suggests that it is mostly authoritarians and dictators who use, amongst other tactics, iconography to entrench their *rulership* over the citizenry. This is a form of power: a psychological tactic to get people to fear and revere them subconsciously, deterring them from fighting against the status quo. Sankara, on the other hand, discouraged the practice of his portrait being exhibited. He refused to have his photos displayed on roadside billboards (as is still the norm in most African countries today). Indeed, Sankara vehemently opposed all forms of idolisation. At face value, it may seem as if this stance by Sankara is not of great significance nor that warrants attention. However, I argue that this principled stance had far-reaching implications for Burkinabè youth then, and still does now. Sankara once said, 'If one Sankara is killed, a thousand more Sankaras will emerge'. We might also recall one of his most famous sayings: 'You cannot kill ideas'.⁴¹

Sankara's total rejection of idolatry was a symbolic gesture to show Burkinabè people, young and old, that the title of president does not make a person untouchable or superhuman. Through this stance, Sankara gave the presidency a more human face, so that people knew that presidents are there to serve, not to be served. They do not rise above the rest of the citizenry. Sankara led a life devoid of the typical lavish lifestyle of most African leaders.

Indeed, unlike Sankara, many African political leaders masquerade as pop stars and celebrities, using their political networks for personal enrichment through ill-gotten wealth. In nearby Swaziland, King Mswati III was recently accused of buying a private jet worth billions of rands, in the midst of the dire economic situation in his country.⁴²

The 'leadership deficit' is a long-espoused problem in post-colonial African countries. Samba Mboup's diagnosis of this leadership paralysis is important in highlighting key weaknesses. Mboup argues that, at the root of this problem, is a practice of *rulership*, as opposed to *leadership*. This, in turn, is due, at least in part, to a turning away by Africa's leaders from an 'African Africa'. This concept 'refers to the Africa that continues to adhere to its own value systems rooted in the Nile Valley civilizations of Egypt and Nubia'.⁴³ Such an African leadership would be anchored in and guided by key Afrocentric principles and philosophies, foremost of which are the pan-African and African Renaissance ideals and commitment to the social and economic empowerment of all black people. In this context, Mboup posits, 'The leadership crisis is, perhaps, the most daunting challenge facing Africa today'.⁴⁴ He further writes:

... to understand the failure on the part of leadership to adequately respond to challenges posed by hegemonic globalization and an inability to fulfil responsibilities, it is necessary to analyse the historical and cultural matrix that produced the contemporary generation and prototypes of leadership in Africa.⁴⁵

While such a historical analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that although Thomas Sankara also emerged from this same historical and cultural matrix of imperialism, he openly challenged it. In our critique of contemporary African leaders, it is important that we remember those extraordinary leaders whose lives were violently ended by neo-imperialist forces and their African collaborators. Sankara was an embodiment of pan-African leadership, including an uncompromising and unapologetic commitment to an 'African Africa'. Sankara, in my view, represents the highest calibre of African leadership and he should be taught in all classes, from primary school to institutions of higher learning – irrespective of the discipline or career paths that the students choose. Learning about Sankara will help African youth to: (a) have a positive political leader to look up to and draw lessons from; (b) know that it possible to transform the living conditions of the poor and downtrodden in one term of office (four years) and; (c) most importantly, know that ethical, principled and servant leadership stands the test of time, and that such leaders will not be forgotten.

What sets Sankara apart from many of his predecessors in Burkina Faso, Africa and the world over is that 'unlike most of the African leaders of his generation and those preceding him, Sankara did not author books that captured or guided his political philosophy in any systematic way. Indeed, Sankara refused to give an ideological name to the revolution'.⁴⁶ One might also add, in line with Murrey's analysis, that Sankara was a thoroughly educated leader in the true sense of the word: he was not 'degreed' like many other African leaders, yet he still achieved more than many of others in a very short period. Perhaps this very lack of formal, academic and conventional education based on a Eurocentric and Western perspective, may have been one of the reasons why he was more concerned about implementing relevant policies, while being pragmatic enough to learn from theories such as pan-Africanism and Marxism. This observation does not, however, insinuate that 'degreed' and academically educated leaders are less pragmatic and sincere in their dealings with their people.

Conclusion

The life and death of Thomas Sankara illustrated extraordinary leadership – and even after his death his ideas continue to manifest in the world. As argued in this paper, Sankara's revolutionary leadership was a bold, charismatic and open-minded one, as he was willing to learn from history and his people. Sankara's leadership was versatile and unconventional. On food self-sufficiency, Sankara was uncompromising and achieved what many thought was impossible. For an arid country such as Burkina Faso, which had been ravaged by desertification and other environmental challenges, to be food independent in less than four years was a great achievement. With regard to African colonial indebtedness, Sankara gave fearless leadership. He was a master organiser, he had the ability to marry theory and praxis, and he strongly and passionately championed women's rights – in this way, he was a 'feminist' revolutionary. He was a robust advocate against personal-ity cults and embodied a leadership style that was imbued with self-sacrifice.

With the words, 'Motherland or death, we will triumph!' Sankara affectionately concluded all his speeches. These words were for the people of Burkina Faso; they were a call of solidarity to the African diaspora, and they were an appeal to the other political leaders on the continent (who unfortunately did not heed his call to stand united in a refusal to pay colonial debt). He, therefore, taught us that chronological age in leadership is not the most important and defining factor; what matters the most is a person's intellectual age and maturity. Sankara's leadership legacy is one of great creativity and conviction. Reflecting on the events of 2014 to October 2015, when Compaoré was finally toppled through popular mass action, Zeilig concluded:

The events that took place across Burkina Faso in the 2014 revolution and the popular resistance to the coup in 2015 were inspired by the example of Thomas Sankara, even if many of those involved had been born after 1987. His name tumbled from the lips of activists, or self-defined revolutionaries, in the latest instalment of the popular movement.⁴⁷

This observation and analysis of his legacy and leadership indeed confirms, almost prophetically, Sankara's words that human bodies can be killed but ideas cannot die, because even in death, he inspired Burkinabè youth to oust the same man (Compaoré) who prematurely ended his life and sought to 'rectify' and reverse all the gains of Sankara's August 1983 revolution.

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