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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 used discourse analysis to examine the emergence of Thomas Sankara's ideology also known as Sankarism (and his praxis?) in the Burkinabe public discourse. In the current 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. The author discussed different creative ways that Burkinabe media users are reinventing Sankara and Sankarism, to reimagine their future. The author contended 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.

Key Words: Thomas Sankara, Sankarism, Burkina Faso, National Identity, African Thought

Introduction

Thomas Sankara (1949-1987) is one of the most famous political figures in contemporary African history (Harsch, 2014). He served as President of Burkina Faso from 1983 to 1987 when he was assassinated in a military coup lead by Blaise Compaoré, his successor. Sankara's pragmatic and ambitious agenda for his country and Africa, together with his eloquent speeches in international forums, propelled him onto the spotlights of the Cold War international politics and discourses. Sankara is celebrated and often remembered with deep sorrow among people who are familiar with his pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist ideology (Sankarism). Nevertheless, his image has gradually eclipsed from the Burkinabe official records and media ever since the military coup claimed his life in 1987. At the international level, also, even though Sankara was a major actor of post-independence Africa, and a strong voice of the non-aligned movement, scholars have scantily documented his life and legacy.

However, in the wake of the Burkinabe 2014 popular revolution, which ousted Sankara's successor, many scholars have started to look back into his ideological legacy and what it could mean to Africans today. For example, in June 2016, *The Journal of Pan African Studies* made 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 assassination in 1987" (p. 218). Naturally, in Burkina Faso, the ousting of Compaoré has opened doors-for people to talk openly about Sankara and to freely display his images in the public sphere. This essay seeks to contextualize the significance of Sankara and his contribution to the African thought and how this contribution fits within current Burkinabe political discourses. It 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 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. His pan-Africanist philosophy of unity, independence, and progress is also prominent on many other social media accounts and websites, which share contents about him, hence providing a space where thousands of followers and visitors interact every day. In the Burkinabe cyberspace, Thomas Sankara remains 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 person and the aspiring political leaders in Burkina Faso.

Patrick Kabré, a young musician: *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* (Patrick Kabré quoted in Forson, 2015).

Mr. X (author of a website that curates content on and about Thomas Sankara): *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* (Zakaa, 2014).

Benewende Satanislas Sankara (a 2015 presidential candidate): *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* (Roger, 2015).

From the top politician seeking presidential election to laymen, sympathy and nostalgia about Thomas Sankara abounds among the Burkinabe. Some of these neo-Sankarists such as Mr. X and Patrick Kabré have even materialized their feelings about Sankara in their works. The former built a website and is now collaborating with Bruno Jaffré, the author of a Sankara biography, to curate contents about Sankara and to make him known to the rest of the world. The latter has made his commitment to singing music composed about his idol. Such national enthusiasm for Sankara's ideology decades after his death is the object of reflection in this essay.

Sankarism means different things to different people. Jaffré (2007) estimated that Sankarism remains a loosely defined concept which needs much more critical studies (p. 293). As such, precaution commends that this essay sticks to a broader understanding of Sankarism as being the people's general perception and understanding of patriotism, pan-Africanism, and rejection of neo-imperialism as embodied in Sankara's life and work. Even so, recent popular re-adoptions of this ideology, whether myth or reality, constitute sufficient reasons for reflection. In the 2015 presidential election, the elusive figure of Sankara became visible and ubiquitous in campaign discourses, promises, and media. Dr. Abdoulaye Soma, a close observer of Burkinabe politics, reported that "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" (quoted in AFP, 2015).

Sankara looms in the social imagination of most Burkinabe and the new media offer the possibility of representing such imagination. Studies in media and popular culture provide a way for explaining media affect and gratification. Aden (1999) argued that consumers of popular culture phenomena such as television series travel vicariously to the imaginative land where the actions of such series take place. He offered that such a symbolic journey allows consumers to draw from their experiences interacting with the sacred land of their imagination to solve real life challenges (p. 188). Similarly, Harlow (2016) contended that US presidents have certain ways of deploying rhetorical tactics both in times of war and of peace to galvanize and inspire the American public opinion. She maintained that American presidents engage rhetorically with Americans “around sites of war to reinvigorate a collective national ethos” (p. 46). To her, the unity of time, space, and action or circumstance around war sites become important rhetorical strategies in the commanders-in-chief’s toolkit for shaping the national character (p. 48). These examples illustrate how past events can contribute to building presently imagined communities. Indeed, American presidents have understood that if certain memorial sites, even physically distant in space and time, have served to build a collective imagination in the past, they can be recollected to create a desired effect in the present time.

In the current Burkinabe socio-political context, it is not a mere historical place that shapes the collective sense of the nation, but rather, a historical figure in the person of Thomas Sankara. 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” (Sankara, 2007, p. 99). Though the fulfillment of such a promise is often debated among some Sankara scholars, the current popular reverence in Sankara remains unquestionable. Therefore, it is my contention that an understanding

of the history of Burkina Faso is needed to explore the scope of the importance of Sankarism, and how Sankara became an indispensable figure for the Burkinabe.

From a Failed Colony to a Post-Colonial Nation

In 1983, Thomas Sankara came to power through a popularly-backed coup in Upper Volta, a country with a difficult colonial history, which continued to deteriorate its sense of national identity even after it gained political autonomy in 1960 from France. By establishing the bases for self-acceptance and self-reliance, Sankara was successful in reshaping and redefining the national identity of Upper Volta, which he renamed Burkina Faso (Jaffré, 2007). 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. These two factors conjured up to make of Burkina Faso an unstable country throughout the post-independence era with a weak national identity.

The trend of migration started during the colonial era and has continued after the independence. According to Gervais and Mandé (2000), during the colonial period, the nascent socio-economic identity of the country was disrupted by the high flow of manpower to coastal neighboring Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire. Fleeing the colony was then an important part of a socio-economic survival strategy. Boutillier, Quesnel, and Vaugelade (1977) agreed that the manpower hemorrhage out of colonial Upper Volta was exacerbated by the French colonial forced labor and the arid climate that did not allow the populations to grow extra cash crops to pay colonial taxes (p. 361). Subsequently, the French colonial government eventually abolished the colony and shared its different constituencies among the other French colonies in 1932, citing Upper Volta's

incapacity to meet the requirements of fiscal self-sufficiency, military conscription, and labor demand from the various colonial institutions. Under the pressure and negotiation of the Mossi dignitaries, the colony was re-established in its borders in 1947.

Colonial migration had an enduring negative impact on the economy and self-acceptance of the Voltaic people as one people belonging to one nation. Economically and socially, the deficiency of manpower in the local workforce meant underproduction leading to cyclical food shortages and devastating famines. In the case of the Mossi ethnic group, which constituted 40 % of the overall population and 60% of the known migrants during the colonial era, migrants did not contribute to the economic development of their home communities. In fact, traditionally the socio-political organization of the Mossi household did not permit all members of the family to have an economic autonomy. Boutillier, Quesnel, and Vaugelade (1977) argued that in colonial Upper Volta, migrants usually stayed permanently in their host countries and subsequently did not invest back in their home country; a few returnees did invest in social practices which did not generate economic interests such as financing funerals and celebrating marriages (p. 366). As a result, while a huge number of people were migrating, they did not send back remittances that could improve the economy of the Mossi land.

The trend of migration did not entirely stop in the post-independence era and its rippling effects have continued to erode the sense of national identity of the Burkinabe. Also, since its independence in 1960, Upper Volta has remained an economically and politically fragile state, which has a juridical recognition but remained empirically weak (Hilgers & Loada, 2013). When Sankara came in power, Upper Volta was not just one of the poorest and the driest in the world (McFarland, 1978), it was also one of the world's most politically unstable countries, undergoing multiple successive military regime changes and being incapable of meeting the basic needs of its

people. Sankara's short term in office remains a positive transformative moment in the history of his country (Hagberg, 2002; Coleman, 2013). A few authors have already documented his immense legacy in terms of improving the living conditions of the people (see Dickovick, 2009; Englebert, 1996; Harsch, 2014; etc.). It would therefore be unnecessary to list that here. Nonetheless, the shaping of a new national identity is worthy of mention.

The advent of Sankara arrival in power and his political ideology have progressively turned what was a failed 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 the self-acceptance of the Burkinabe and their emancipation in the concert of nations. The name of the country was changed from Upper Volta (Haute 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 (1987) has argued that considering that worldwide, the 1970s were a difficult time for socialist regimes, Sankara's success in rallying the masses behind his cause is, in itself, an extraordinary case that speaks to how his ideology was in line with the needs and aspirations of his people. He fulfilled the people's desire to be ridden of the colonial shame and the weight of post-colonial economic and cultural exploitations. That is what Guy reported as "a higher stage of development in the Burkinabe society" (p. 78).

However, after Sankara's death, 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 discourses during the 27 years following his assassination. Any physical reference to him was erased in the cities and towns of the country. In fact, the Compaoré's regime has sought to

literally bury Sankara along with his revolutionary ideas. 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 to remember Sankara's revolution. 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 from the failures of Compaoré's regime to meet up the people's political need for freedom, autonomy, citizenship and self-direction. Also, Sankara has continued to exist in the private space and in the collective imagination of the people who have known him.

Sankarism and the Modern State

The next 27 years under Compaoré's reign established an apparent political stability, maintained with an internal brutal force, which international media drastically failed to cover (Hagberg, 2002; Coleman, 2013). Additionally, Compaoré successfully kept a respected image abroad (Coleman, 2013; Jaffré, 2010). 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 (Bonnecase, 2015; Hilger & Mazzocchetti, 2006). His outward looking politics and his internal use of political clientelism allowed him to maintain absolute power for almost three decades. Reza (2016) reported that Compaoré was a strong ally of Washington and Paris, whom he allowed access to Burkina as a base 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.

Since the 2014 popular revolution that overthrew President Compaoré, Sankara's ideology has 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. In fact, *Le Balai Citoyen* (The Citizen's Broom), one of the civil society movements, which were in the forefront of the October 2014 revolution, has efficiently utilized Sankara to legitimize itself as a spokesperson for the people against the dictatorship of President Compaoré. In fact, this heterogeneous social movement was spearheaded by young popular musicians who rallied the youth across the country (Henry, 2015) through their use of Sankara's anti-imperialist and anti-bourgeoisie discourses 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 most often the case for most dissatisfied youth across the continent, Burkinabe pop musicians have sought to critique their government by taking Sankara as a reference.

Two prominent public figures emerged among the pop musicians who stood as strong voices against government malpractices: rapper Smockey and reggae musician Sams' K. 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 lead *Le Balai Citoyen*. This civil society movement mobilized millions of people in 2014 to protest against President Compaore and his project to amend the constitution and seek a re-election (Henry, 2015). Their success in mobilizing the youth to protest and oust the sitting president demonstrates that pop music, far from being just a marginal form of art can serve as a strong tool for mobilization and action. The pop musicians utilized it to present 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.

Mbembe (2001) insisted that in the postcolonial world, state power works through the grotesque and the obscene of the governing elite creating a relation of “mutual Zombification” with the people; a relation in which both groups live in conviviality (p.104). Oppositely, Burkinabe pop music employs the same ‘zombification’, but only to unveil the shortcomings of government’s work and disrupt the faux sense of conviviality between the leaders and the people. Music becomes more than a simple empirical state of the 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 in English as “Tie, Suits, and Rot”. Such a title exemplifies the ultimate Zombification of the Compaore’s regime represented by the rotting body in suits and tie. In the meantime, Smockey’s work was a call for action to mobilize morally and physically against Compaore. Songs like Thomas Sankara, featuring Senegalese rapper Didier Awadi, and “A qui profite le crime?” (Who benefits from the crime? (crime here refers killing of Sankara) became very popular among the youth.

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 (Sawadogo, 2015). Considering the role of the army in the power structure in Burkina Faso, this renaming symbolizes 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 the role of the army to serve the people and not the interest with integrity. Sankara is known for his integrity and exemplarity as a military leader.

The contribution of Burkinabe diaspora communities to the post-insurrection political discourse 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 (Some, 2016). 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" (Forster, 2015). 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 anti-imperialist agenda (Jaffré, 2007, Skinner, 1989). The Burkinabe youth took that slogan literally to mean that all of them are now new-born 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", "One step with the people is better than one hundred steps without them" (Deutsche Welle, 2015, BF24 TV, 2014), read some of the signs. Though the objective of the revolution was to demand social change, that change is envisioned through Sankara.

The Web 2.0 and its host of emerging new media now provide a platform for representing, negotiating, and redefining Sankara and Sankarism. Though Sankara remains an elusive 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. As response, the national political discourse is then infused with the ambivalence of the Sankarist ideology. Prominent actors of the public sphere such as politicians have understood that Sankara is now a rallying factor and they formulate their discourse around him. Sankarism becomes a sort of a faux clocking symbol of unification even if in practice his ideology remains to be 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 for almost everything despite the abundance of resources. In the meantime, social dissatisfaction is widespread across the continent as the elite failed to attend to the basic needs and aspirations of the people. Furthermore, Africans remains 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 the people recollects 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, which 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 N'Krumah still has an alloy in the minds of most African, they can be

historical landmarks for reference. But first to arrive to that, the epistemology on and about Africa must be widened to incorporate alternative thinking. The question of the 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 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-27-year regime, it appears that more opportunities arise 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.

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