

caused something in time C without considering time B'.<sup>1</sup> Yet while historians such as Cooper called for greater historical specificity in Mamdani's work, *Citizen and Subject* became a significant text among scholars in legal studies and activists working on customary law, because of its mapping of how colonial administrations distorted African historically rooted governance and legal systems to produce customary law that advanced colonial interests. In court cases and campaigns, lawyers, legal studies scholars, and activists continue to use *Citizen and Subject's* framework to challenge the centralization of power in chiefs and the state forcing Black people under customary law, as remnants of indirect rule.<sup>2</sup> *Neither Settler nor Native*, is vulnerable to similar critiques as Cooper's around historical specificity and selective reading of and engagement with historical events. Its theorizing of the relationship between violence, political identity, and the nation-state provides a challenging and engaging framework for conceptualizing political violence in contemporary states that were formerly colonized and that were formerly colonizers, and that like *Citizen and Subject* will likely make it a text that moves between civil society work around political organizing and critical academic work on the state.

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## No Place for Honest Men

### *Thomas Sankara: A Revolutionary in Cold War Africa*

By Brian Peterson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. Pp. 350. \$90.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9780253053765); \$35.00, paperback (ISBN: 9780253053763); \$34.99, e-book (ISBN: 9780253053787).

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In the years following the assassination of Captain Thomas Sankara, president of Burkina Faso, on 15 October 1987, he became part of the pantheon of nationalist heroes of the Cold War era, as well as a symbol of African revolutionary dreams deferred. In 1983, the thirty-three-year-old Sankara seized power in a military coup d'état, after a military career and a brief tenure as prime minister from January to May 1983 under Major Doctor Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo. Intellectuals, activists, and political organizers continue to imagine the possibilities of Sankara's revolution and debate what might have transpired in Burkina Faso, and in West Africa generally, had Sankara been allowed to complete his political project. In Brian Peterson's tremendously impressive study, *Thomas Sankara: A Revolutionary in Cold War Africa*, the first complete English-language

<sup>1</sup>F. Cooper, 'Postcolonial Studies and the Study of History', in A. Loomba et al. (eds.), *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Durham, NC, 2005), 405–6.

<sup>2</sup>For example, see, *Moseneke and Others v Master of the High Court* [2000] ZACC 27; 2001 (2) BCLR 103; 2001 (2) SA 18, which cited *Citizen and Subject* to explain the bifurcated state that developed under colonialism separating customary power and civil power; *Sigcau and Another v Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs and Others* [2018] ZACC 28; 2018 (12) BCLR 1525 (CC), which describes a transformation of 'accountable traditional leaders' into 'decentralised despots'.

biography of Sankara, the author presents the Burkinabé leader's political strengths and weaknesses as critical to understanding his revolution and the sequence of domestic and international initiatives that Sankara devised to secure Burkina Faso's economic self-sufficiency and political autonomy.

Sankara appraised himself as a revolutionary in the mold of Cuba's Fidel Castro and Guinea-Bissau's Amílcar Cabral. He was renowned for his high energy, politically charged speeches in rural Burkinabé villages and international forums. 'Leaders of Sankara's charisma and moral integrity were rare, and his message had resonated with the youth, whose own aspirations he seemed to reflect', Peterson writes in the book's opening paragraph (1). For many 1980s intellectuals, 'Sankara represented a wider trend in African politics, characterized by emerging populist discourses and popular movements, often led by young military leaders, such as [Ghana's] Jerry Rawlings' (93–4). Peterson shows that the revolution's first two years brought unprecedented people-centered development to the country. But soon after these changes, his political project began to flounder, well before Blaise Compaoré, his longstanding political ally, close friend, and Minister of State, orchestrated the coup that ended both Sankara's regime and his life.

When Sankara took power in 1983, Burkina Faso's economy relied on migrant labor for Cote d'Ivoire's cocoa industry. The country was subjugated, Sankara said, 'by the world imperialist capitalist system. Our revolution is a revolution that is unfolding in a backward, agricultural country... evolving from a colony into a neocolony' (142). He aspired to transform Upper Volta into an economically self-sufficient, fully sovereign nation-state. One of his first steps was to adopt the name Burkina Faso, Land of the Honest People, for the country.

The substance of Sankara's revolution is best understood through his actions and policies, rather than his rhetoric. Peterson's focus on the revolution's inflection points is among the many strengths of his narrative. There was early skepticism of Sankara's ability to meet his ambitious goals for the first two years of the revolution. As Peterson notes, 'Many observers were astonished that the revolution had done so much in such inauspicious circumstances—with debt, drought, and political adversity. But Sankara thrived at defying the odds; he relished in doing things that had not be done before' (207). Sankara steered Burkina Faso away from the French, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund development models. Yet, Peterson emphasizes the importance of rhetoric and performance as among Sankara's strategies to strengthen his political standing and enhance his mystique. At the same time, Sankara's claim that Burkina Faso received no Western financial aid was misleading. As Peterson explains, France continued to fund many of Sankara's development projects (138–9). Although financial self-determination and political autonomy were Sankara's core goals for the revolution, by 1985, the reality of the constraints on the country's economic growth inspired Sankara to temper his opposition to Western aid. 'He stated unequivocally: "We are not opposed to private enterprise as long as it doesn't infringe upon our honor, or dignity, and our sovereignty"' (139).

I found Chapter Eight to be the book's most engaging and informative chapter; in it, Peterson presents the defining features of Sankara's revolution that marked the apogee of his political movement by its third and fourth year (181). Sankara worked to cultivate a sense of Burkinabé national identity, through the arts, expanding education, and access to health facilities, and mass mobilization development projects. He was, as Peterson outlines, 'far in advance of his contemporaries on women's issues,' and he was a role model 'within an era of increasing women's political participation in Africa' (196). Sankara was also ahead of his contemporaries in combating climate change and deforestation, both of which he tied to ongoing imperialism. With a worsening drought and famine in the country, Sankara addressed deforestation and land degradation as priorities and opportunities for transnational cooperation and pan-Africanism. Peterson quotes Sankara as stating that 'African unity is a necessity and no longer a choice'. And that, 'we can fight against desertification only by erasing our borders' (204). His ambitious 'green belt' across the Sahel to stall desertification was a precedent followed by Kenya's Wangari Mathai and her Green Belt Movement and the African Union's Great Green Wall.

Within this milieu of economic vulnerability, Peterson presents France and Libya as playing major roles in Burkinabé domestic affairs. US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister

Margaret Thatcher had an outsized impact on the economic and political discourse coming from the West during the 1980s. But for Burkina Faso, France's socialist President François Mitterand embodied Western intervention in Africa. When Mitterand was elected in 1981, Peterson explains, there was much overlap between his and Sankara's political positions. Yet by 1983, 'the Mitterand government was forced into an abrupt change of course, embracing Thatcherite austerity measures that seemed to disavow Mitterand's entire program' (82). On the opposite end of the spectrum of political engagement, Sankara's relationship with Libya's Muammar Qaddafi unsettled Western powers and served as a source of military support for Burkina Faso against threats from neighboring countries, a basis for Sankara to claim political independence in foreign affairs, and he hoped, economic assistance. 'Libya would support Sankara's seizure of power through the provisioning of arms, but Sankara would also denounce Libyan intervention in Chad and rebuff Qaddafi's efforts to expand Libyan influence in Burkina Faso' (96).

I found Peterson's narrative of Sankara's efforts to forge a radical foreign policy and strengthen diplomatic ties with nations of the Global South fascinating, but Peterson's rapid tour through these events lacked clarity at times. It would have been more productive if he had widened his analytical aperture to position Sankara as a window into the decade's changing political landscape, in order better to display for his readers how unique and tenuous the final bursts of revolutionary politics in the Global South were, from Grenada, to Nicaragua, Jamaica, and Burkina Faso, during the last decade of the Cold War. I wanted to know more about Sankara's relationships with the leaders of these countries, particularly Grenada's Maurice Bishop and Ghana's Rawlings. They and Sankara were together part of the last generation of truly revolutionary anti-imperialists.

That said, Peterson's impressive book will be a foundational text for future studies of Africa during the late Cold War and the promise and perils of revolutionary change. Peterson has made a welcome and overdue contribution to the limited scholarship on Sankara and Burkina Faso, with a text that is in equal parts biography of Sankara and of Burkina Faso during the 1970s and 1980s. *Thomas Sankara: A Revolutionary in Cold War Africa* is an outstanding example of how a skilled historian can explore a region's history through the biography of one remarkable individual.

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## Epistemology and History in Central Ghana

### *Our Own Way in this Part of the World: Biography of an African Community, Culture and Nation*

By Kwasi Konadu. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. Pp. 328. \$104.95, hardcover (ISBN: 9781478004165); \$27.95, paperback (ISBN: 9781478004783); \$27.95, e-book (ISBN: 9781478005363).

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Kwasi Konadu's rich and challenging work begins with a grainy VHS recording of a funeral. Funeral videos are common in Ghana, but are usually reserved for prominent business persons or