

BOOK REVIEW

Amber Murrey, ed. *A Certain Amount of Madness: The Life, Politics and Legacies of Thomas Sankara*. London: Pluto Press, 2018. Distributed by the University of Chicago Press. xiv + 382 pp. Notes. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-7453-3757-9.

A Certain Amount of Madness: The Life, Politics and Legacies of Thomas Sankara, edited by Amber Murrey, is a compelling volume that assembles a unique collection of writings from twenty-seven contributors with varied disciplinary and professional backgrounds. Divided into four distinct parts (life and revolution; political philosophies; legacies; contestations and homages), the book draws primarily on empirical data and literature reviews to retrace the achievements of the charismatic former president of Burkina Faso, who was assassinated in 1987. Through the foreword, introduction, twenty-three chapters, and afterword, the contributors shed light on Sankara's acclaimed and contested political philosophies as well as on their implementations. The task of weaving such a rich patchwork is useful as well as challenging. Indeed, Sankara died without leaving any written legacy of his complex ideologies, in contrast to other famous African leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah and his Nkrumaism or Julius Nyerere and *Ujamaa*.

Thomas Sankara was not keen on the Western categorizations associated with the "Global South," so the contributors to this volume were careful when defining or labeling his policies. The book supplies a chronological account of the multiple layers that comprised Sankara's political philosophies, a mixture of Marxism, Leninism, and Pan-Africanism, strongly grounded in Burkinabè socio-economic and cultural realities. Some similarities between Sankara and other historical figures such as Che Guevara and Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem are also highlighted, along with Sankara's involvement in opposition to imperialism both within and beyond the African continent. The reader's attention is drawn to the dangerous and unfair superiority complex that comes with labeling Sankara as the "African Che." Rather, the contributors advocate for a recognition of Sankara for who he was: a Burkinabè and African leader who was courageous enough to take action and die for his convictions, despite all the national, regional, and international obstacles he encountered. This edited volume also touches on Sankara's attitude toward artistic representations of himself during his lifetime. Sankara was opposed to self-representation in art, in line with his wish

to remain as modest as possible. However, he learned from contact with countries such as North Korea (317) about the usefulness of art to promote his 1983 revolution.

Sankara's unique legacy can also be seen in his implementation of policies that dismantled patriarchy in his country. He insisted that women should gain their long-term freedom for themselves, rather than having it be "granted" by men in a condescending, paternalistic, and patronizing way. The most successful public health operation undertaken in the Burkinabè territory during Sankara's rule was probably the Vaccination Commando in 1984. Sankara showed through his actions that it was possible to progress as a nation without perpetuating the status quo of global corporate exploitation of the majority by the minority. The alternative path used by Sankara represented a serious threat to the said minority present within and outside the Burkinabè borders. Sankara was ahead of his time, but history proved that he was right to depict debt as a neo-colonial tool to keep "Third World" countries in endless thrall to the West.

Aside from the depiction of the anti-imperialism associated with most of Sankara's actions described above, the book also offers a contextualization of the political struggles that have taken place in Burkina Faso since the country's independence in 1960. This demonstrates that Sankara's revolution was embedded in a continuous tradition of the Burkinabè people's struggle for their rights. The popular uprising in October 2014 that fueled the resignation of the former Burkinabè president Blaise Compaoré is thus depicted as another chapter in the continuous human rights struggle in the country's history. Drawing on Sankara's political philosophies for a radical socio-political and economic change in Burkina Faso, the *Balai Citoyen* movement was a key player in the October 2014 uprising in the country. Sankara similarly has had a great influence on African youth beyond the Burkinabè borders, up to three decades after his assassination. This impact is illustrated with examples such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) South African political party, created in 2013. The book also emphasizes the various actions taken by organizations such as the International Committee for Justice for Sankara (CIJS) over the decades to seek and demand justice for Sankara's murder.

One of the book's shortcomings is the occasional misprint, such as the different spellings of *Diendré* instead of *Diendéré* (96), that could lead a less knowledgeable readership to real confusion regarding the veracity of the key events narrated throughout the volume. The richness of data, however, coupled with the book's structure, still make it an enjoyable and informative read, for a broad as well as an academic audience. Students of African Studies in particular and anyone else interested in a detailed account of unsung African heroes would appreciate this beautiful compilation.

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For more reading on this subject, see:

- Martin, Guy. 1987. "Ideology and Praxis in Thomas Sankara's Populist Revolution of 4 August 1983 in Burkina Faso." *African Issues* 15: 77–90. doi:10.1017/S1548450500003371
- Wise, Christopher. 1998. "Chronicle of a Student Strike in Africa: The Case of Burkina Faso, 1996–1997." *African Studies Review* 41 (2): 19–36. doi:10.2307/524825