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# *Assassinated in His Prime, an Iconic African Leader Haunts a Trial and His Country*

*Thirty-five years after the killing of President Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, his supporters hope for justice. But the full truth about the murder, including any foreign role, is elusive.*

*The statue commemorating Thomas Sankara in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.*

**By Declan Walsh**

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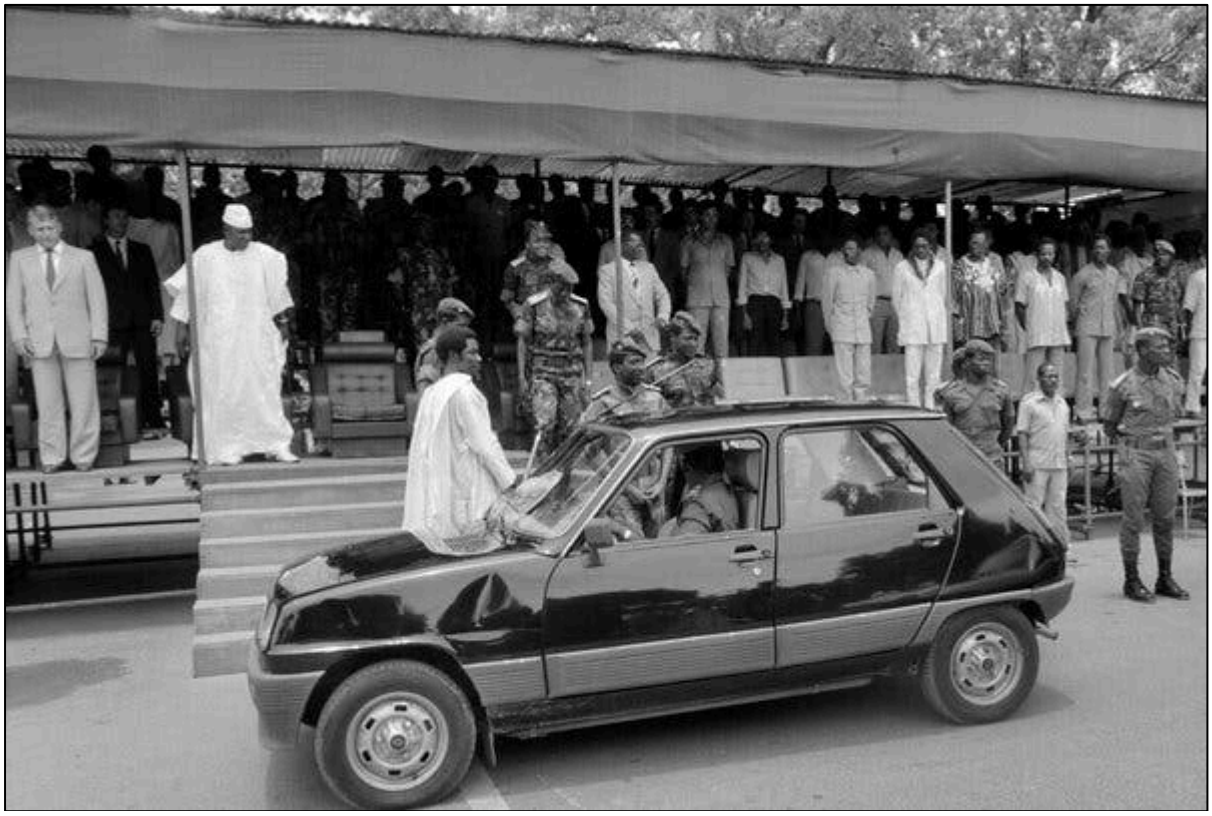
OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso — Decades later, the scene of the crime is still intact: a deserted building of cracked windowpanes and dust-blown corridors, its courtyard strewn with withered leaves. Gunfire erupted here in October 1987 as Thomas Sankara, the 37-year-old president of Burkina Faso, was meeting with six aides.

“It sounded like a tornado on a tin roof,” recalled one of them, Alouna Troaré, retracing his steps through the ghostly site.

A charismatic army officer of revolutionary zeal, Sankara had transformed this landlocked West African nation in just four years, with sweeping policies that prioritized the poor, defied the West and inspired adulation across Africa. But now a hit squad was at his door.

“It’s me they want,” said Sankara, lifting his hands as he left to face the soldiers waiting outside, Mr. Troaré recalled. Seconds later Sankara was dead, gunned down in a hail of bullets that struck him seven times, according to new forensic evidence. Mr. Troaré was the sole survivor of the meeting.

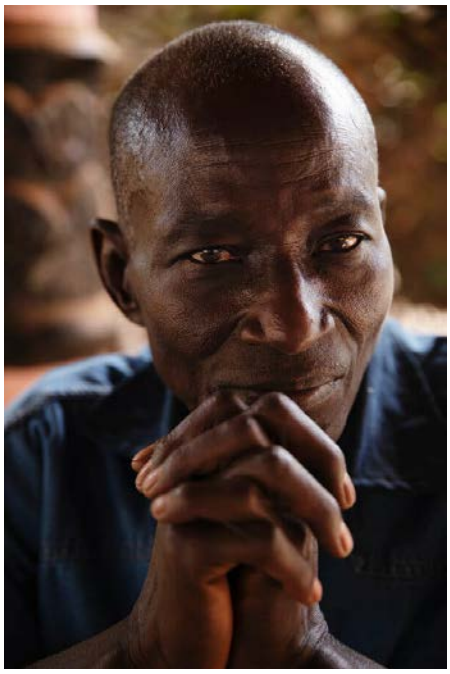


*Burkina Faso’s president, Capt. Thomas Sankara, center (in army beret), with Blaise Compaoré to his left, during a military parade in Ouagadougou in 1985.*

Those shocking events are the focus of a riveting murder trial nearing its conclusion at a tightly guarded courtroom in Burkina Faso’s capital, Ouagadougou. For five months, a military tribunal has heard testimony about 14 men accused of plotting, executing or covering up the deaths of Sankara and 12 other people in 1987 — the opening act of a bloody coup d’état that set Burkina Faso on a path to decades of repressive rule.

Despite the challenge of dissecting a 35-year-old crime, the trial has refreshed a Cold War drama with elements of Shakespeare and the Sopranos: a tale of power games, intrigue and the fraternal betrayal of an iconic leader often compared to Che Guevara. Sankara’s image is everywhere in Burkina Faso, adorning motorbikes, murals, T-shirts, even chocolate bars. Residents hope the verdict will offer some rare accountability for a coup — at a time when military takeovers are rife in the region.

“We don’t need vengeance,” said Fidèle Kientega, a former Sankara adviser and one of over 100 witnesses at the trial. “But we do need the truth to come out.”



*Fidèle Kientega, a former Sankara adviser.*

That outcome is far from guaranteed. The trial was nearly derailed on Jan. 24 when mutinying soldiers ousted Burkina Faso’s elected president and installed a military leader — sub-Saharan Africa’s sixth coup in 18 months. And while the hearings have unearthed some hidden truths about the Sankara assassination, others remain stubbornly out of reach.

The main defendant, a former president, Blaise Compaoré — a once-close friend of Sankara who seized power within hours of his death, then ruled Burkina Faso with a clenched fist for 27 years — lives in gilded exile in the neighboring nation of Ivory Coast, refusing to return. Other suspects are dead or have fled the country.

And the trial has touched only lightly on the vexed issue of whether, as happened often in postcolonial Africa, foreign powers had a hand in the young leader’s death. Several had strong motives.

Reagan-era American officials often clashed with Sankara, an avowed foe of “imperialism and neocolonialism,” over his alliances with Fidel Castro of Cuba and Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya. Rival African leaders saw him as a pernicious influence in the West Africa region.

But the greatest suspicions have fallen on the country’s former colonial power — France — whose officials were intent on toppling Sankara from the early days of his rule, according to declassified American diplomatic cables.

One recent evening Paul Sankara sipped a beer at a noisy roadside bar in Ouagadougou, contemplating the buzz of a city he was rediscovering after years in exile.

He had fled decades earlier, in the torrid aftermath of his brother Thomas's death, slipping across the border into Mali on a motorbike under an assumed name. It was a bad time to be called Sankara in Burkina Faso.

*The government building where Thomas Sankara and 12 aides were killed on Oct. 15, 1987.*

That topic, however, has been excluded from the trial.

"Many countries were unhappy with the revolution in Burkina Faso," said Anta Guissé, a lawyer for the Sankara family. "They viewed Sankara as a threat to their influence, to their grip on the region. His probity was inspiring to many Africans, which I think is one of the reasons he was killed."

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The new ruler, Mr. Compaoré, had done his utmost to erase the memory of the assassinated leader, who was buried hastily at night in a commoner's grave by prisoners who worked under the headlights of a military truck. His family's request for a Catholic funeral was refused. The death certificate said he died of "natural causes."

Paul Sankara returned to Burkina Faso in August, for the first time in 32 years, from his home in Washington, D.C. For the Sankara family the trial is “a chance to heal,” he said — and to establish the realities about a young leader whose story has been blurred by years of mythmaking, dissimulation and lies.

*Anta Guissé, a lawyer for the Sankara family.*

Burkina Faso, a poverty-stricken and landlocked country with limited water and natural resources, seems an unlikely setting for a stirring revolution. But after Thomas Sankara came to power in 1983 at the age of 33, one of the youngest leaders in modern African history, he embarked on an ambitious program that sought to completely redefine it.

He scrapped the country’s colonial-era name, Upper Volta, in favor of Burkina Faso, which means “land of upright men.” He vowed to break its dependence on the West while eradicating corruption and waste at home. The government fleet of Mercedes limousines was sold and replaced with cheaper Renault sedans, and the president hitchhiked rides to international conferences aboard the jets of other African leaders.

He introduced reforms that were years ahead of their time — a quota for women in government jobs, bans on forced marriage and genital cutting, and a campaign to plant 10 million trees and stave off desertification. He cultivated an air of revolutionary chic, arriving to meetings with an ivory-engraved pistol — a gift from the North Korean leader, Kim Il-sung — and posing alongside musicians with his red Fender Stratocaster guitar.

*Thomas Sankara in 1986.*

“This is not a toy,” he declared to an audience in Harlem in 1984, brandishing the pistol. “And when we fire these bullets, it will be against imperialism.”

He frequently clashed with the leaders of France, who viewed him as a troublesome influence in a region that Paris considered its strategic backyard. “This man is a bit disturbing,” President François Mitterrand said during a tense visit to Burkina Faso in November 1986, in response to a speech by Sankara lashing France’s tolerance of leaders from apartheid South Africa. “He goes further than is necessary.”

Mr. Kientega, the Sankara aide, was alarmed by the exchange. “I told him, ‘You have started a war,’” he recalled.

Sankara’s rule could also be harsh and intolerant. His government muzzled the free press, imprisoned some opponents without trial and faced accusations of human rights abuses. In 1986 Amnesty International reported that a soldier had died in custody after being tortured with a blow torch.

By then, Sankara’s revolution was waning. Opposition from unions, civil servants and factions inside his own military was growing. Many ordinary people were tiring of unpopular measures like a ban on beer that was scheduled to come into effect the following year.

But after his death on Oct. 15, 1987, Sankara entered the pantheon of martyred African revolutionaries alongside figures like Patrice Lumumba of Congo, the anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko of South Africa and the nationalist Amílcar Cabral of Guinea Bissau.

*Paul Sankara, a younger brother of Thomas Sankara, at the family home in Ouagadougou.*

And 27 years later, when the crowds finally rose to topple Mr. Compaoré, torching the Parliament and sacking his brother's mansion in 2014, they invoked Sankara's name and waved placards bearing his image.

"Murder! Murder!" cried protesters during early demonstrations.

Today it is the victim who stands tall. A towering bronze statue of the slain leader, erected in 2019 in front of the building where he died, has become Ouagadougou's main tourist draw. Rosine Boussini came to pay her respects one evening while visiting family on a trip from her home in California.

"Things were never the same" after Sankara's death, Ms. Boussini, 42, mused as her giggling children posed for photos, fists clenched, in imitation of the gleaming bronze figure behind them.

But Ms. Boussini was skeptical that the high-profile murder trial could truly obtain justice. "Blaise Compaoré is no longer in the country," she said. "So who are you going to punish?"

The hearings take place in a cavernous, wood-paneled hall in Ouaga 2000, an upmarket neighborhood of broad avenues that includes the presidential palace and the high-walled mansions of Burkina Faso's tiny elite. Every morning the accused — former soldiers and their commanders mostly — enter through a side door, passing through a long, luminous curtain to take their places.

*A Sankara family lawyer, Prosper Farama, talking to reporters in Ouagadougou in January.*

Sitting opposite them is Sankara's widow, Mariam, who fought for decades to have this trial, and returned for it from her home in Montpellier, France.

The trial was interrupted on Jan. 24 when soldiers surrounded the nearby residence of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, ousting him from office. The coup fed off popular fury at Mr. Kaboré's failure to stem the Islamist violence that has overwhelmed Burkina Faso since 2016, displacing 1.5 million people and killing thousands.

Although the coup's turmoil subsided within days, it highlighted the fragility of a trial already suffering from one keenly felt absence.

Blaise Compaoré's role has been a central focus of the hearings. Witnesses have testified that Mr. Compaoré had plotted for months to oust Sankara in 1987, and that the commandos who killed him had set out from Mr. Compaore's house.

Mr. Compaoré's Paris-based lawyer, Pierre-Olivier Sur, said his client had rejected the trial because it was not internationally recognized. "We are in the middle of a parody, a poor piece of theater," he said by phone.

the 1980s, Mr. Compaoré and Mr. Sankara were the best of friends. As young military officers, they played in a band that toured Burkina Faso and later allied to seize power in 1983. The Sankara family adopted Mr. Compaoré, whose parents died young, as a kind of surrogate son.

After Sankara's death, his devastated parents felt doubly betrayed. "I have two sons," Paul Sankara, the victim's brother, recalled his father saying: "One of them is dead. Can someone explain to me what happened to the other one?"

*A family photo taken at the Sankara home in Ouagadougou around 1972. Thomas Sankara is in the upper left corner. His father and mother are at center.*

Many in Burkina Faso blame the split between the two men on Mr. Compaoré's marriage to Chantal Terrasson de Fougères, a member of the pro-France elite in neighboring Ivory Coast — pointing, in turn, to another, even more elusive dimension of the murder case.

Separate from the trial, the authorities in Burkina Faso are investigating the "international aspect" of Sankara's death — code for the purported role of Ivory Coast and the former colonial power, France.

Declassified American diplomatic cables show that French officials actively sought to remove Sankara during his first months in power, viewing him as a dangerous influence, said Brian J. Peterson, a history professor at Union College and the author of a recent Sankara biography.

The day after Sankara's death, French agents removed sensitive wiretap recordings from the offices of the local intelligence service, the trial heard. And in the years that followed, Mr. Compaoré became a staunch ally of Paris — so much so that during his tumultuous ouster in 2014, French troops evacuated him by helicopter to Ivory Coast, French news outlets reported.

Acknowledging those suspicions, France's president, Emmanuel Macron, promised in 2017 to declassify all French documents related to the Sankara case. So far three batches have been released.

*President Emmanuel Macron of France and then President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré of Burkina Faso in Ouagadougou in 2017*

But they exclude many secret documents including records from the notorious "Africa cell," which coordinated France's most sensitive activities in its former colonies, said Bruno Jaffré, a French expert on Sankara who runs a website dedicated to his life.

"The story of the assassination has become much clearer as a result of the trial," he said. "Yet there's so much we still don't know."

A French official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters, insisted his government had sent all of the requested documents to Burkina Faso.

Sankara's enduring appeal raises intriguing questions about what the young revolutionary president would have become, had he lived. Other once-hopeful leaders of the same generation, like Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, have morphed into autocrats.

Yet Sankara's reputation as a righteous, incorruptible figure still resonates across Africa, invoked by other beret-wearing firebrands as far as South Africa.

The trial paused last week, for the third time, after defense lawyers filed a motion seeking to dismiss key charges. A decision is expected in the coming weeks.

For Sankara's family, this is a moment for closure. Once the trial ends, Paul Sankara said, his surviving 10 brothers and sisters intend to bury Thomas properly — not under the lights of a military truck, but with the funeral he deserved 35 years ago.

*Declan Walsh is the Chief Africa correspondent.*