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From Upper Volta to Burkina Faso: A Study of the Politics of Reaction and Reform in a Post-Colonial African Nation-state, 1960-1987

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From Upper Volta to Burkina Faso: A Study of the Politics of Reaction and Reform in a
Post-Colonial African Nation-state, 1960-1987

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

Glory goes to GOD, the creator of all good and evil, for allowing me to finish this work.

This is for my parents Joe and Syndi Williamson who always loved and believed that I could do “all things through Christ.” It is for my only sibling, sister Dan’yelle Rosea Williamson, my role model and second mother. It is also for my “extended family” and the “human family.”

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Table of Acronyms

AOF	<i>Afrique Occidentale Française</i> (French West African Union)
CEAO	<i>Communauté Economique d’Afrique de l’Ouest</i> Economic Community of West Africa (English Version) ECOWAS- Economic Community of West African States
CDR	<i>Comités de Défense de la Révolution</i> (Committees for the Defense of the Revolution)
CFTC	<i>Confédération Française des Travailleurs Croyants</i> (French Federation of Working Reverends)
CMRNP	<i>Comité Militaire pour Reformé et National Progrès</i> (Military Committee for Reform and National Progress)
CNR	<i>Conseil National de la Révolution</i> (Consul of the National Revolution)
CPPC	<i>Commission du Peuple pour la Prevention de la Corruption</i> (Commission of People for the Prevention of Corruption)
CSP	<i>Conseil de Salut du Peuple</i> (Consul for the People’s Salvation)
DOP	<i>Discours d’orientation politique</i> (Political Orientation Discourse)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
Lipad	<i>Ligue Patriotique pour le Développement</i> (Patriotic League for Development)
MNR	<i>Mouvement National pour le Renouveau</i> (Movement for National Renewal)
OMR	<i>Organization Militaire Révolutionnaire</i> (Revolutionary Military Organization)

PDU	<i>Parti Démocratique Unifié</i> (PDU- Unified Democratic Party)
PDV	<i>Parti Démocratique Voltaïque</i> (PDV-Democratic Volta Party)
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
SNEAVH	<i>Syndicate National de Enseigneurs Africain de la Hauté Volta</i> (National Syndicate for African Educators in the Upper Volta)
TPR	<i>Tribunaux Populaire Révolutionnaire</i> (Popular Revolutionary Tribunals)
UDV- RDA	<i>Union Démocratique du Voltaic-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain</i> (Democratic Union of Volta-African Democratic Rally)
UFB	<i>Union des Femmes du Burkinabé</i> (Women's Union of Burkina)
UNAB	<i>Union Nationale des Anciens du Burkina</i> (National Union of Elders in Burkina)
ULC	<i>Union des Luttes Communistes</i> (Union of Communist Struggles)
UV	<i>Union Voltaïque</i> (Voltaic Union)
WB	World Bank

Abstract

From Upper Volta to Burkina Faso, is the study of the politics of reaction and reform in a post-colonial nation-state of Burkina Faso. Since its independence from France on 5 August 1960 to 15 October 1987, *Burkina Faso*, the “land of the upright” people, has experience five changes in government. All of the coups that took place in this twenty-seven year period were reactionary and reforming. However, the most memorable reforms arrived after the coup of 4 August 1983 which gave rise to a youthful president in a thirty-three year old Captain Thomas Sankara. As the leaders before him, Sankara reacted against a post-colonial government that he and supporters saw as inadequate. Unlike the previous coups in the Upper Volta, this work argues that the 4 August 1983 coup brought class consciousness to the forefront. It aimed to establish its identity by changing the country’s name from the colonial name of *Upper Volta* to *Burkina Faso*. The revolutionaries appeared to be genuine in meeting their words with action by working to create self-sufficient citizens, curb environmental depredation, combat corruption in government and provide women more opportunities. Though the Revolution in Burkina Faso (1983-1987) did not end the country’s ambitions for a multi-party democracy, it did elevate the status of women, literacy, mortality and pride for the homeland.

Introduction

Burkina Faso is a landlocked country located in the middle of West Africa. In 1984 revolutionaries decided to rename the former French colony of Upper Volta, 'Burkina Faso.' Burkina Faso is a name drawn from two of the most influential languages spoken in the country. Ethnic Mossi speak Moré and Fula is spoken by the Fulani (Fulani are called *Peul(s)* in French). Since 1984, the people of the country have called themselves 'Burkinabé.' The suffix 'bé' in the name 'Burkinabé' is a Fula term used to define an "inhabitant" in the language spoken by ethnic *Peuls*. The word 'Burkina,' in Moré, the most dominant ethnic language spoken there means "integrity" while 'Faso' in Fula means "land." Mossi and Fulani are the most prevalent ethnic groups in this country, but they share the land with many other ethnicities such as the Lobe, Gourounsi, Yarse, Samo, Dogon, and Mande.¹

Between its independence on 5 August 1960 and 4 August 1983, Upper Volta experienced six changes in its government. In the course of twenty-three years, the government oscillated between civilian, military, capitalist and socialist ideological frameworks of rule. Yet, from 1983 to 1987, the military that controlled the government

¹ On the Moré (Mossi) and Djoula (Fulani) linguistic translations of 'Burkina Faso', see Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso: Unsteady Statehood in West Africa* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), 1, 58.

declared a ‘revolution’ aimed to transform the country. The revolutionary government promised to provide services for and share power with all the people.²

On the evening of 4 August 1983, revolution reached the Upper Volta in the form of a military council headed by Captain Thomas Isidore Noël Sankara and three young junior officers in the parachute division of the national military. In Upper Volta, at that time, any commissioned or non-commissioned officer in any divisions of the national army holding any rank below ‘Colonel’ was considered a junior officer. Therefore, Majors, Captains, and Lieutenants constituted officers of the lower rank and file in Burkina Faso’s military in the 1980’s. Captains Thomas Sankara and Blasé Compaoré, Henry Zongo and Major Jean-Baptiste Boukary Lingani constituted the core of the *Organization Militaire Révolutionnaire* (OMR-Revolutionary Military Organization) that took power in August 1983.³

This research work operates from the premise of seeing revolutions in newly independent nations not as disruptions of legitimate rule following colonialism but political movements that considered and advanced alternative approaches to development. Alternative approaches to development are defined here (as in Upper Volta’s case) as development-oriented governments under the control of charismatic and non-traditional rulers (in this case, neither local Mossi nor foreign ‘Frenchmen’). Non-traditional government addresses development problems with “local” solutions as opposed to overlooking them or allowing foreign forces to set the terms for development regardless of the means by which it acquired power. This work acknowledges that any

² Pearl T. Robinson, “Grassroots Legitimation of Military Governance in Burkina Faso and Niger: The Core Contradictions,” in Goran Hydén and Michael Bratton. *Governance and Politics in Africa*. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992), 146.

³ Victor T. Le Vine, *Politics in Francophone Africa* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004), 146.

government that addresses poverty, health and women's rights issues on its own terms is a legitimate government. This work argues that Thomas Sankara's revolutionary government offered Burkina Faso a legitimate and alternative approach to development that was effective in identifying and addressing the issues that faced the country.

The revolution required unity from the country's populations to end political factionalism. Sankara's efforts as president suggest that he recognized that power comes not from outsiders like France and Cote D'Ivoire and the local politicians these foreign countries supported, but rather Burkina's local army and civilian populations. This work looks at the territory and colony of Upper Volta, and the political developments that led to independence from France. Chapter two looks at how the history of ethnic factionalism in the independent country led to conflicts for power. Chapter three looks at the 4 August 1983 military coup by assessing three of the major actions that revolutionaries took to transform the nation. The conclusion assesses the legacies of the revolution.

The Revolutionary Military Organization's (OMR) origin is shrouded in mystery. It is still unclear whether it was secretly formed by Sankara and other radical soldiers years before the coup or after the seizure of the national radio station on that 4 August night. The ideologically radical OMR shared power with two outstanding civilian leftist organizations, namely the *Ligue Patriotique pour le Développement* (Lipad-Patriotic League for African Development) and the *Union des Lutttes Communistes* (ULC-Union of the Communist Struggle).⁴ On the first year anniversary of the Revolution (August 1984), the leaders changed the country's name to 'Burkina Faso' in an attempt to move the country beyond its colonial experience. The efforts to transform the administration to

⁴ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 55-56.

protect the environment and women's rights by the revolutionary military regime generated mixed reactions from the people in the country.

Published works in English on the Burkinabe Revolution present challenges for anyone seeking to understand and place that revolution in context. One reason for this is that Burkina Faso had limited external relations with English speaking countries in West Africa. Thus, French remained as the language of government. Therefore, there is limited number of the historical accounts of the revolution in English. Nevertheless, the few published English sources on the Revolution, along with available translations of speeches and official documents of the revolutionaries, offer enough information to permit an assessment of what took place in Burkina Faso from 1960 to 1987. Of the few English-speaking scholars who have written about the country, fewer than twenty have developed substantial analysis of the origins, leaders, initial successes and the later setbacks of the Burkinabé revolution.

The first published work, an eighteen page article in English on the Burkinabé Revolution, appeared in the 32nd Edition of the *Review of African Political Economy*. In 1985, Victoria Brittain published interviews of CNR members in her "Introduction to Sankara & Burkina Faso." The article recounts the recent political history of the Upper Volta under Major Jean Baptiste Ouedraogo's *Conseil de Salut du Peuple* (CSP I and CSP II -Council(s) of Salvation in People) regime and offers a biographical study of Sankara along with an analysis of his first two years as president of Burkina Faso.

In her article, Brittain argues that the August Revolution of 1983 in the Upper Volta served two purposes. First, it was a reaction to the failures of the CSP government to deliver on its political promises of power sharing with a youthful ideological left.

Second, it was to liberate the civilians from the historical economic inequalities prolonged by ethnic politics and the plunder of the country's resources. For her, the "ten years" leading up to the August 1983 revolution were characterized by "clandestine political work" and military coups. Quite simply, civilian politics operated in the shadows of martial law since January 1966. The military assumed the roles of not just defenders of the nation, but also its legislators or policy makers.

In 1980, President Colonel Saye Zerbo issued decrees that put junior-rank soldiers in political positions usually reserved for civilians. According to Brittain, these measures were partly responsible for enabling the young socialist and communists soldiers to greatly influence the nation's politics that led to the fourth intervention of the military in national politics in August 1983.⁵ Thus, as Brittain observes, the revolution did not occur over night. Instead, for years, the previous military regimes appointed junior-ranked soldiers to power positions. Perhaps the most striking example was Thomas Sankara's appointment to Secretary of State under Colonel Saye Zerbo's military regime from 1980 to 1981.

In recounting the events which occurred during the revolution, Victoria Brittain places less emphasis on Sankara's leadership of the revolution than on the political upheavals between civilian revolutionary and anti-revolutionary political parties that supported or opposed the CNR military regime. She acknowledges the two main groups that fought for and against CNR leadership. The *Ligue Patriotique pour le Développement* (Lipad-Patriotic League for Development) supported the radical government and the *Syndicate National de Enseigneurs Africain de la Hauté Volta*

⁵ Victoria Brittain, "Introduction to Sankara & Burkina Faso," *Review of African Political Economy* 12.32 (1985): 39-47.

(SNEAHV-National Union of African Teachers of the Upper Volta), a rightist teachers union, opposed the CNR's move to power. According to Brittain, not only was there "political infighting" between Lipad and SNEAHV, Lipad found itself at odds with the ULC (Union of Communist Struggles party), and the OMR (Revolutionary Military Organization) of the CNR (National Revolutionary Council) was to take for the nation.⁶

Brittain also explores the development of the *Tribunaux Populaire Révolutionnaire* (TPR- Revolutionary Popular Tribunals), aimed at reforming the country's judicial system. She cites the "unprecedented explosion," of small-scale "development initiatives across the country."⁷ The author's analysis of the gains on the domestic front, such as the building of "solidarity compounds" for the homeless, the nationalization of all lands and a national tree planting campaign to stop desertification in the Sahel is illuminating. However, she does not mention the successes and failures of later programs such as that of "agricultural self-sufficiency," pursued through land reforms in the Sourou Valley, the Tambao railroad project and the reforms of primary, secondary, tertiary, and vocational educational systems. It is fair to point out that these programs had not started by the time she completed the article.⁸ Nevertheless, this work provides a detailed analysis of the year prior to 1982 and from 1983 to 1985 the period regarded as the 'early' revolutionary years.

Belgian political scientist and scholar, Rene Otayek, has offered another perspective on the Burkinabé Revolution. His work, "The Revolutionary Process in

⁶ Ibid, 45-46.

⁷ Ibid, 46.

⁸ Rene Otayek, "The Revolutionary Process in Burkina Faso: Breaks and Continuities," In John Markakis and Michael Waller, *Military Marxist Regimes in Africa* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1986), 85.

Burkina Faso: Breaks and Continuities” was initially written and published in French. The English version appeared in John Markakis’ and Michael Waller’s edited book *Military Marxist Regimes in Africa* published in 1986.⁹ It situates the rise of the Burkinabe revolution in four events. First, the revolutionary government identified itself with low income groups, students, peasant farmers, and unemployed youth, a few of the many poor groups in Burkina Faso. Revolutionaries wanted equality so they imposed salary cuts on higher wage earners (for example, secondary and tertiary educators, civil servants, and high-ranked army officers, to name a few) to make resources available to all citizens (particularly, the poor majority). Second, the government removed officials of former regimes from office. Third, the government appointed military cadets (or lower ranked military persons) into positions of power. Fourth, the CNR relied on staged pro-junta rallies to affirm the “rise of new social and political forces” in the country. These new political forces were created to support the CNR platform and to follow its leftist ideological orientation. Their arrival in Upper Volta was late compared to (some similar) political developments that had already taken place in some of the neighboring countries.

For Otayek, the reversal of traditional political rule (between the Mossi chieftaincies, French educated civilian politicians and the military) and the ideological rivalries that existed between them presented ideologically ‘radical’ military men an opportunity to intervene in national politics. What sets the Burkina example apart from other similar developments in the West African region, in the view of Otayek, was the successful attempt by the revolutionaries to match their verbal promises with action. They figuratively took power “from the hands of the bourgeoisie” and placed it in the

⁹ Ibid, 87.

hands of the people.¹⁰ They actually ruled top-down but not without expressing the desire to (eventually) cede power to what Sankara hoped would be a socially conscious people allied with his and the CNR's idea of alternative government.

The second generation of historical analysis of the revolution tends to situate it alongside other regional experiments of Socialism on the African continent or within the framework of ethnic histories inside the country. However, the only exception here is Samantha Anderson's translation of Thomas Sankara's speeches in *Thomas Sankara Speaks*, published in 1988.¹¹ It is a primary source translated into English. She has carefully translated every speech delivered by Thomas Sankara that offers insight into the revolution. For example, each chapter focuses on a speech delivered by Sankara pertaining to the political, environmental and social situations in the country such as land misuse, gender and economic inequalities that he and the regime worked to correct. This source gives an excellent road map for scholars seeking to understand Thomas Sankara and his leadership of the revolution in Burkina Faso. This source contains evidence that reinforces this work's central argument that Sankara's intentions, at least rhetorically, to improve the lives of all peoples in Burkina Faso, were genuine, if not sincere.

American anthropologist and former U.S. ambassador to the then Upper Volta, Elliot Percival Skinner wrote *The Mossi of Burkina Faso: Chiefs, politicians, and soldiers* in 1989. The book looks at the political development of the Upper Volta/Burkina Faso and offers a nuanced analysis of the revolution. His epilogue presents the

¹⁰ Ibid, 85.

¹¹ Thomas Sankara, *Thomas Sankara Speaks*, 1.

revolution as the outcome of decades of political oppression of ordinary civilians by the political elites and their foreign backers. He writes:

“What Sankara’s revolution demonstrates is... a new generation... tired of [how] the traditional chiefs and earlier politicians dealt with both local and global affairs... [They] want to chart a new course... [close] to the realities of power-locally, nationally, regionally, and globally.”¹²

Belgian economist Pierre Englebert’s book, *Burkina Faso: Unsteady Statehood in West Africa* (1996) locates the revolution at two political junctures.¹³ First, the instabilities that Sankara and his cohorts inherited from a failed multiparty democracy under Maurice Yaméogo (1960-1966). Second, coups initiated by soldiers to reach political consensus in the country.

The third generation of writing on the Burkinabe Revolution emerged after the year 2000. These include but are not limited to articles and books commemorating Sankara and the revolution. Three books in this period deal with the Revolution in Burkina Faso. The first is Victor T. Le Vine’s *Politics in Francophone Africa*. This book includes Sankara’s revolutionary initiatives. For example, Le Vine offers a comparative study of all countries that experienced revolt against traditional political structures. For Le Vine, “Sankara was different” because of his ability to follow development rhetoric with action. This was illustrated through the various local development initiatives that

¹² Elliott P Skinner, *The Mossi of Burkina Faso: Chiefs, Politicians and Soldiers* (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland, 1989), 237.

¹³ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso: Unsteady Statehood in West Africa*, 58.

took place during his presidency aimed at liberating the Burkinabe from Upper Volta's history of resource dependence.¹⁴

The second is Jimmy D. Kandeh's *Coups from Below: Armed Subalterns and State Power in West Africa* (2004). It looks at coups initiated by junior officers in West African countries. It is primarily concerned with the military's hold on political power and how that institution became revolutionized under the leadership of Thomas Sankara. Kandeh sees a parallel between Sankara's character and his regime. Unlike the previous leaders in Burkina Faso, Sankara tried to set a national example of power sharing through his policies. This book is important to this work because it supports the assertion of Sankara's efforts to balance Burkina society by making the nation's wealth available for all.¹⁵ Finally, in 2007, Pathfinder released the second edition of Sankara's speeches: *We Are Heirs to the World's Revolutions*, translated from French into English. In the preface to the second edition, Mary Alice Waters, president of Pathfinder press sums up the character and politics of Thomas Sankara:

“Sankara believed in a world not created by ‘technocrats,’ financial wizards,’ or ‘politicians,’ but by the masses of peasants whose labor is praised and defended with the riches of nature, the source of all wealth being shared.”¹⁶

If this is so, then scholars of the Burkinabe Revolution must pay more attention to the personality that fostered these alternative approaches to government. Again, the concern here is not the events and peoples that worked to discredit the movement

¹⁴ Victor T. Le Vine, *Politics in Francophone Africa*, 148.

¹⁵ Jimmy Kandeh, *Coups from Below*, 119.

¹⁶ Thomas Sankara, *We Are Heirs of the World's Revolutions: Speeches from the Burkina Faso Revolution, 1983-87* (New York, New York: Pathfinder, 2007), 11.

(although they cannot be overlooked) but rather those who tried to prolong its principles. Sankara's environmental initiatives like combating land misuse, reforming the administration, and improving women's rights are three of the many policies Sankara championed in his country to cleanse it of its past inequities. This work explores these three initiatives taken by the revolutionary government.

Chapter One:

Upper Volta: From Colony to Burkina Faso (1897-1966)

“Development in the past has always meant the increase in the ability to guard the independence of the social group and indeed to infringe upon the freedom of others-something that came about often irrespective of the will of the persons within the societies involved.”

-Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), p.4

This chapter assesses the origins of the 4 August 1983 coup in the Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) within the context of the political history of Upper Volta. Following an introduction of Upper Volta's colonial history (1897-1960), this chapter explores the first six years of independence under a civilian presidency (Yameogo 1960-1966).

Between 1897 and 1960, France colonized the territories occupied by the Mossi (kingdoms of Ouagadougou and the 'Yatenga' Mossi of Ouahigouya to name two), Peuls, Gurunsi, Marka, Lobi, Bwa, Bobo, and other ethnic groups within what is today Burkina-Faso. The French tried several times up until 1896 to subdue, by treaty, the Mossi people who resided near the bend of the Niger River. The French exploited inter-ethnic quarrels and used them to further undermine intra-ethnic relations. They needed more land and raw materials to develop forts on the coastal towns (on the Atlantic Ocean) they seized a decade earlier in Abidjan (Cote D'Ivoire), Dakar (Senegal), and Conakry (Guinea). The Niger River provided the French a more accessible water-way into the '*French*' West African interior. From Bamako, the capital city of Burkina's northern neighbor Mali, the

French had a suitable place to launch their conquests of the Mossi country to the southeast of the Malian capital. The French were eager to admit the Mossi lands and peoples into their growing overseas possessions.¹

French analysis of ethnic groups in 'Burkina' society appears to have rested on the paradigm of labeling and valuing the 'strength' of a people based on their interactions with others, and the land they occupy. From this they were able to devise ways to wrestle the land from the occupants by supporting one ethnic group against another in conflicts by usually siding with the group that they identified as being 'weaker.' The French colonial authorities recognized the similarities in social organization especially bureaucratization between themselves and the Mossi. This allowed the French to view the Mossi as superior to the other groups. Therefore, the French first focused their efforts on conquering and colonizing the 'weaker' ethnic groups surrounding the Mossi before turning their attention on the Mossi kingdom(s).

With each passing year since 1887, the political autonomy of ethnic kingdoms in the territories that were to become Upper Volta (and subsequently Burkina Faso), were signed away through "treaties of protection." In 1888, the ethnic-majority Fulani (*Peul*) cities of Dori and Sebba, in the north of the bend on the Black Volta, were conquered with the conclusion of treaties promising Peuls protection against their stronger neighbors the Mossi. The French tried again unsuccessfully in 1890 to sign a treaty with the *Mogho naba* of the Ouagadougou kingdom of the Mossi. Mogho Naba Wobgo was the undisputed 'superior' *naba* (or emperor) of the Mossi people.²

¹ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 18.

² Ibid, 19.

The Mossi kingdom can be briefly surmised here as a loose (political) federation of ethnic Mossi. There were *nabas* in all of the cities of the Mossi kingdom, one that covered over half of the present day territory. Cities such as Ouagadougou, Ouahigouya, Tenkodogo and Koudougou (to name four), all had a *naba* who presided over the affairs of each 'city-state'. These *nabas* (regents) reported to the *Mogho naba* who reigned over all the Mossi (with the *Mogho naba* taking residence in Ouagadougou, the de facto Mossi capital). In the three year period between 1892 and 1895, the French failed to gain Mogho Naba Wobgo's signature of approval for a protectorate over Mossi lands but not without gaining Gurunsi lands to the south (in 1894). In the early months of 1895, ethnic Peuls (Fulani) signed treaties with the French giving them control over the lands to the far west of the country.

The *naba* of the Yatenga kingdom, an ethnic Mossi kingdom of Ouahigouya rivaling that of the Mossi kingdom in Ouagadougou, signed his city and surrounding lands in the northern part of the 'territory' over to the French colonial administrators in April and renewed their status with the French in November of that year following a forced change in *naba* leadership (1895). Once the territories surrounding the Mossi Empire were subdued, the French moved in on Ouagadougou residents. On January 20, 1897, the French succeeded in signing a protectorate with Kouka. He was the first French appointed *naba* and brother of the self-exiled Mogho Naba Wobgo. The successor of Mogho Naba Wogbo fled to Senegal a few days earlier, upon the news of the destruction of his army that he sent to confront the French advancement into his country.³

³ Patrick Manning, *Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa, 1880-1985* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 73.

From its creation in 1897, and the French settlement there up to 1919, the ‘Upper Volta’ ‘colony,’ experienced indigenous resistance and territorial name changes. As a territory under French marshal law, soon to be colony, the territory served as French West Africa’s human labor reserve. The French colonial administration divided the territory (covering modern day Burkina) into *cercles* (regions) without the regard for the traditional political boundaries of ethnic groups. The French built missionaries, schools, railroads and exported raw materials and peoples to other places outside of the Upper Volta ‘territory.’ The colonies of Cote D’Ivoire and Mali (to name two) were the benefactors of raw resources and laborers sent from the Upper Volta ‘territory’ to further the development of their economies.⁴

Taxation, seizure of lands, forced labor and conscriptions generated resentment. The Mossi had enough in 1908 when a Muslim leader among them convinced peoples to cease paying taxes. He organized two thousand men to march on Ouagadougou. The rebellion was crushed less than thirty miles outside of the town. According to Englebert, the success of the French counter-attack saw an end to militant Mossi resistance. The Mossi were not the only group to resist colonial rule as other groups like the Gurunsi, Peul and Markas launched separate efforts to curtail French imperialism without success.⁵

The ‘Upper Volta’ territory became a colony of its own in 1919 until 1932 when the French dissolved its status deciding that it was no longer profitable to remain a colony. The colony of Upper Volta experienced relative peace throughout its colonial history following the initial conquest and settlement of the French. The purpose of the

⁴ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 21.

⁵ Ibid, 22.

colony in these years was primarily economic. The French *employed* the Mossi and others for labor services in the mining and building of railways.

Politically, French colonial policies insured that the economic policies were carried out by the *Mogho naba*. For example, the colony's first governor, Edouard Hesling, instructed the Mogho Naba Kom II to organize men to erect the first administrative buildings. The colonial administration had 'Burkina' men and women plant and grow cotton, mine minerals, cut trees and pave roads for the transport of resources to neighboring colonies. They created a migrant worker class in where Africans "were forced to work away from their homes" to complete projects in neighboring 'countries' thus enabling more social rifts within the lands of the Volta.⁶ This occurred in 1922 when the colony sent 2,000 men to work on railroads in Cote D'Ivoire. Another 6,000 'Voltaic' were sent to construct the Thies-Kayes railway in Mali.⁷

The colony of Upper Volta slowly gained political autonomy within the French community. This 'community' was composed of France and all of the nation's overseas territorial possessions. Following the emancipation of France from Germany's control at the close of World War II, the 'Fourth-Republic' felt obliged to reward the *tirailleurs*; French West African soldiers who served the French in WWII. In 1944, French government recommended that colonial subjects receive political representation in French West African colonial affairs.⁸

Colonial subjects in the Upper Volta colony ceased the moment to organize politically when the recommendations were made into policy in 1945. Within a year

⁶ Ruth Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy years in French West Africa*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 2006), 77.

⁷ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 23.

⁸ *Ibid*, 25-26.

following the conference in Brazzaville, Congo, Ouezzin Coulibaly (an ethnic Jula), was elected as Upper Volta's first Consul General of the Constituent Assembly.⁹ Unitary political parties and federalist political parties blossomed in all of the territories of French West Africa. The parties were diverse and provided tough competition for seats in the *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF-French West African Union) Constituent Assembly.¹⁰

The most notable federal political party to appear in the Upper Volta 'territory' (because the 'colony' was dissolved since 1932 and was not reinstated until 1947) was the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA-Democratic African Rally). Created in Bamako, Mali in 1946, the RDA took a radical stance by favoring direct independence over colonialism and (or) assimilation of Africans into the 'French community' (commonwealth). It also held the desire for all French colonies to unite, politically, into one legislative body. The RDA contained branches across French West Africa and served as the political blueprint for all political parties in the soon to be independent French West African nation-states. In the first year of the AOF assembly, Upper Volta had no direct representation as their first candidate lost to Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire. However, in 1946, Upper Volta received political representation by earning three out of the sixty-one seats available.

Not all 'Burkina' supported the federalist aspirations of the RDA in the 'territory'. They saw that there may have been more to gain if the 'territory' remained a 'colony' instead of uniting politically with other colonies in the AOF. The most notable nationalist

⁹ Patrick Manning, *Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa*, 145.

¹⁰ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 27.

political party of the territory was the *Union Voltaïque* (UV-Voltaic Union). Originally called the *Union pour la Défense des Intérêts de la Haute-Volta* (Union for the Defense of the Interests of the Upper Volta), the UV party was created in 1945 by Mossi chiefs and their French-schooled offsprings.¹¹

The years between 1944 and 1960 witnessed a progression of political representation in the Upper Volta colony. The colony's neighbors enjoyed political stability under strong unopposed leaders such as Cote D'Ivoire's Houphouet-Boigny, a product of French education in the Ivory Coast colony and the party he represented, the RDA. The Upper Volta experienced (compared to neighbors) a multi-party system. Divisions within the RDA and the UV led to the creation of more political parties with very similar aspirations only differing in leadership and ethnic representation.

The most notable political party leaders of these pre-independence years were Daniel Ouezzin Coulibaly, Phillipe Zinda Kabore, Nazi Boni, Gerard Kango Ouedraogo, Josph Conombo and Henri Guisso. These political leaders of the Upper Volta colony can be divided into two groups, the federalists and the nationalists. With the exception of Ouezzin Coulibaly and Phillipe Kabore supporting the RDA, the latter politicians in Boni, Ouedraogo, Conombo and Guisso leaned towards a nationalist independence. This was not without the leaders having disagreements with one another which resulted in the splintering of the UV into political parties with similar aims and different approaches. It was a system that reflected diversity on one end. On the other side, the various ethnic groups appeared to lack homogeneous political aspirations needed to secure a national identity (coherency).¹²

¹¹ Ibid, 28.

¹² Ibid, 29-30.

In 1956, the *Loi Cadre* (law tallies) granted universal suffrage for single electoral colleges, and most importantly gave territorial assemblies in each colony ministerial powers. This culminated in the rise of nationalist tendencies along with a steady decline of support for the federalists approach to replace the colony.¹³ The passing of the French law may have been both a blessing and a curse for Upper Volta politics. It led to further complications toward achieving political legitimacy as there existed many traditional (Mossi kingdom) and modern (RDA and UV) political parties following the French decrees. It was a blessing for nationalist oriented politicians in that the policy effectively curved federalist ambitions by allowing each colony to make political decisions for the subjects in its own domain. It was a curse because it undermined the unity brought about by a shared colonial experience and may have indirectly fueled the ethnic tendencies that kept groups confined.

Ironically for the Upper Volta, the arrival of the *Loi Cadre* may have indirectly diminished the efforts of the pro-nationalist UV (Voltaic Union) to build support in the country. As a result, the nationalist party split into two camps in 1953. Around that time, the RDA (African Democratic Rally) party altered its name to appeal to the growing nationalist sentiments as a means to gain support from a splintered UV party. It is also fair to mention that the RDA had a strong grass-roots approach towards political mobilization unlike the UV's French connections, especially with the colonial governor, Albert Jean Mouragues.¹⁴ The RDA appealed to Africans who wanted direct independence from France but uncertain whether they wanted a federalist or unitary political structure. Within ten years (from 1945 to 1956), the RDA was able (not without

¹³ Patrick Manning, *Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa*, 148.

¹⁴ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 28.

some poll manipulations) to reinvent itself to appeal to the ‘Burkina’ population. They achieved this by taking a centrist approach toward the federalist and nationalist debate by creating party alliances that supported both positions.

From 1957 to 1959, the Upper Volta colony flirted with the idea of joining the Mali Federation. Ideologically, this federation was to succeed the AOF as the first independent united band of former colonies with one political destiny. In reality, it became a two-month political union between Senegal and Mali that was originally intended to attract all French West African colonies to join. However, many of the colonies had more to gain by remaining independent ‘nations’ as opposed to opening their borders and politics to a regional ruling body. It is also worthy to note that “France and Ivory Coast brought pressure...to withdraw from the federation” and join the *Conseil de l’Entente* (Consul of “the Agreement”).¹⁵ Houphouët-Boigny’s creation of this consul provided ‘soon-to-be’ *independent* ‘nations’ an opportunity to continue positive relations with France while maintaining some modicum of autonomy.

Shortly after the end of WWII, Maurice Yaméogo, an ordained minister and a *second* generation Upper Volta civilian politician, allied himself with the *Union Démocratique du Voltaïque* (UDV- Volta Democratic Union) party, a branch of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA- Democratic African Rally). From 1946 to 1958, Yaméogo rose from a general member to a Consul General of Upper Volta’s Territorial Assembly. The Democratic Voltaic Union branch of the African Democratic Rally (commonly referred to as the UDV-RDA) political party was created by Yaméogo’s friend and ally Houphouët-Boigny of the neighboring French colony of Côté

¹⁵ Michael Crowder, *Colonial West Africa* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1978), 305-306.

D'Ivoire to serve the populations of French West Africa (prior to independence movements).

In the course of roughly fifteen years leading up to Upper Volta's independence (in August 1960), the UDV branch of the RDA slowly gained popularity (not without political setbacks in the early 1950's) in the colony (soon to be independent country). The arrival of independence on 5 August 1960 in Upper Volta may have been ceremonial for the UDV for it had already controlled much of the political matters in the country after it received more autonomy from France in the fall of 1958. On 8 December 1960, UDV representative Maurice Yaméogo was elected with a landslide 99.5 percent of the votes to preside over the newly independent government and the new unitary constitution of the Upper Volta. This constitution "set up a unicameral parliament, but still recognized multiparty politics" as the legislative force of national politics.¹⁶

An ethnic Mossi, Nawalagmba Yaméogo was born in Koudougou on 31 December 1921. He lived up to his native first name meaning "one who unites" by establishing a one-party state system in his country. He received the Christian name "Maurice" at the age of eight (1929) when he was baptized by French Catholics in a local monastery. Maurice Yaméogo (a.k.a. Mister Maurice) attended secondary school at a Catholic mission in Pabré. He married his first wife Felecite Zangre after completing his formal education in 1939. The following year, he became politically active by joining the colonial administration to serve as a civil servant.¹⁷ In the 1940's, he joined the *Confédération Française des Travailleurs Croyants* union (CFTC-the French

¹⁶ Victoria Brittain, "Introduction to Thomas Sankara and Burkina Faso," 44.

¹⁷ Alistar Bobby-Evans, "Maurice Yameogo," About.com African History. N.P., 2001. Web. 18 July 2012. <<http://africanhistory.about.com/od/burkinafaso/a/Bio-Maurice-Yameogo.htm>>.

Confederation of Working Believers) and received an official political post as a Consul General of the Territorial Assembly located in his home town, in 1946. He remained a member of the Territorial Assembly until he was requested in 1958 to join with Ouézzin Coulibaly. Coulibaly was distinguished Upper Voltaic political figure and a prominent member of the UDV-RDA party who died shortly before independence (as most of Upper Volta's first generation of metropolitan politicians) leaving the mantle of the party's presidency to Yameogo, a position he held until he was elected to serve as the country's first president in 1960.¹⁸

Now as president of the democratic and multiparty Republic of Upper Volta, Yaméogo did not see democracy as an adequate form of government for Upper Volta. For him, party politics did not promote national unity; strong personalities that attracted party supporters did. On the international stage, he feared that Upper Volta would be seen as a nation that lacked consensus at a time when the survival of former colonies was the most important political objective. He wasted little time in abandoning the multiparty constitution to favor a UDV-controlled one party state. In February 1962, a UDV-RDA congress assembled to declare the party's "supremacy over all [national] institutions."¹⁹

Yameogo's leadership was self-serving. He imposed tough austerity measures and limited opposition to his party in the last four years (1962-1966) of his presidency. In 1963, Upper Volta saw the rise of a tyrant in president Yameogo. He worked to consolidate his power through unconstitutional appointments of family members to government posts such as the appointment of his siblings and cousins to the positions of prime minister, chief of staff and secretary of state.

¹⁸ Victoria Brittain, "Introduction to Thomas Sankara and Burkina Faso," 45.

¹⁹ Ibid, 45.

Yameogo travelled often during his presidency and used government funds to finance lavish parties for foreign dignitaries. In 1964, he visited U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson in Washington D.C. the only significance being to flaunt his excesses and to affirm his country's new alliance with the United States.

In December of 1965, President Yaméogo approved a 20% cut in the salaries of civil service employees accompanied by reductions in social security for retirees. His high austerity measures tested the patience of union leaders.²⁰ On 3 January 1966, workers unions protested the salary cuts, and Yaméogo's kleptomania, and nepotistic practices as Upper Volta's first head of state. The civilian demonstrators called on the military to take over the reins of government. On that evening, Colonel Sangoulé Lamizana responded to the wishes of the demonstrators by placing Yameogo under arrest. On national radio, he declared himself head-of-state. This move made Lamizana's actions "the first in a succession of numerous military coups."²¹

The army's intervention in politics contributed to national instability (in diverse ways) by challenging the traditional and ethnic-based civilian political structures. Against the wishes of civilian groups such as union members, students and teachers, each military regime attempted to consolidate its control over the country. With each passing president ascending from the ranks of the military, citizens outside of the army witnessed a rise in the hunger for power by young soldiers with socialist and/or communist ideological convictions.²²

²⁰ Ibid, 46.

²¹ Laura E. Boudon, "Burkina Faso: The Rectification of the Revolution," 128.

²² Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 54.

Chapter Two:

Remodeling the Republic: The Military and Politics in Upper Volta

(January 1966-August 1983)

This chapter looks at Upper Volta's experiment with military regimes (1966-1980). It will also examine Thomas Sankara's political career as a soldier by looking at his tenure as a Secretary of State under Colonel Saye Zerbo's military government, and as President Jean-Batiste Ouédraogo's Prime Minister. Finally, the chapter accounts for the first few months of revolution in Burkina Faso leading up to the first public criticisms of the revolution by the *Syndicate National de Enseigneurs Africain de la Hauté Volta* (SNEAVH-National Union of African Educators of the Upper Volta) in December 1983.

On 4 January 1966, a deposed and detained Maurice Yaméogo, from the majority Mossi ethnic group, officially resigned from the presidency. Subsequently, he was banned from politics by General Sangolé Lamizana and also sentenced to four years of imprisonment. In the months following the overthrow of Maurice Yaméogo on 3 January 1966, President Col. Lamizana appointed himself to the rank of *General*.

The fourteen years of military rule under General Lamizana are summarized here in three stages. The first stage of his presidency (from 1966 to 1969) was to maintain the appearance of order by presiding as the undisputed leader of the country. The country at this time was under military martial law and it was represented by civilians carefully selected by the military. In Lamizana's second stage of his presidency (from 1969 to 1973), the appointment of a prominent civilian politician Joseph ki-Zerbo to the post of

Prime Minister symbolized the military's move to restore civilian multiparty politics. The third stage of Lamizana's rule, (the last seven years from 1973 to 1980), saw the suspension of civilian-led democracy through Lamizana's creation of the *Mouvement National pour le Renouveau* (MNR-Movement for National Renewal) party, and gradual restoration of military martial law.

Lamizana came from the ethnic Samo minority group located in the northwestern region of Upper Volta. In seeking to mediate a peaceful return to civilian political rule in the country, Lamizana tried to preserve the dominance of the Mossi "ethnic groups by serving as mediator" between the civilian groups and the nation's various ethnic groups.¹ Lamizana's decision to allow Mossi dominance in politics was attributed to two beliefs. The first is that the Mossi, sharing centuries of history with the territory (a land covering most of modern Burkina Faso), knew what was best for the modern state. Second, that as long as the Mossi allowed other ethnic groups equal representation in politics, that peace and political stability could be restored in the country.

On the economic front, Upper Volta relied on loans from for its neighbor (Coté D'Ivoire) and former colonial power, France, to fund economic and urban development. Lamizana worked to maintain positive relations with both countries. He leased lands, favored foreign development models over local ones to attract more business to help pay the interest on loans. Upper Volta tried to compete with the rest of the world in providing free commerce, trade, safety, and technical innovation.

In October of 1980, a teachers union organized strikes to call for the political involvement of the more progressive elements in the army. The union expressed dissatisfaction with Lamizana's inability to curtail "corruption and nepotism" in the

¹ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 54.

country. Other dissatisfied members of the army noted the failures of Lamizana's MNR which the teachers, workers, and students unions had pointed out. Accusation of Lamizana's government of "degeneration of social life and political confusion" in the country was all Colonel Saye Zerbo needed to act. On 25 November 1980, Zerbo overthrew Lamizana's government and suspended the nation's constitution, thus effectively ending the short-lived 'Third Republic' of Upper Volta.²

On 27 August 1932, Saye Zerbo was born an ethnic Samo to a mother and father (names unknown) in a village called Tougan in the Sourou Province, located in the west of the country. Saye Zerbo received his secondary education abroad in Mali and Saint-Louis, Senegal. In his late twenties, Saye Zerbo joined the military and attended military academy in France. He was subsequently deployed in 1960 to serve in the Indochina war, and the Algerian war for independence (that had begun against the French in 1952). In 1961, Saye Zerbo joined the (then) Upper Volta military. From 1974 to 1976, Saye Zerbo held a foreign minister position. Under the final four years of a democratically elected (retired General) President Lamizana, Saye served as a commander for Ouagadougou's regiment. He also directed the country's military intelligence agency. On 4 November 1980, this forty-two year old war veteran and military leader staged a coup to the delight of trade union strikers.³

After seizing power, Colonel Saye Zerbo moved to promote his party, the *Comité Militaire pour le Redressement et le Progrès National* (CMRPN-Military Committee for Reform and National Progress), as the governing party of the country. It was to operate in

² Victor T. Le Vine, *Politics in Francophone Africa*, 170.

³ "Zerbo, Saye." Zerbo, Saye Biography. S9.com, 12 Mar. 2007. Web. 18 July 2012. <<http://www.s9.com/Biography/Zerbo-Saye>>.

Upper Volta as the only legal party to meet the challenges faced by ordinary civilians. He wanted to shift national focus from mediating ethnic-based political rivalries, which had been the priority of Lamizana's government, to serving the needs of every citizen in the country.⁴ By failing to respond to popular demands for the eventual return to civilian rule, the Zerbo regime lost its legitimacy with the people. Large numbers of migrant workers, peasants, students, teachers, and lawyers protested military rule and called for a return to democratic rule in Upper Volta.

President Zerbo fell because he failed to address the growing political tension between Mossi chiefs and the radical Marxist-oriented young soldiers (notably Sankara, Lingani, Zongo and Compaoré) in the military and the Patriotic League for Development (Lipad).⁵ On 7 November 1982, just days before Colonel Saye Zerbo's second year as president of the Upper Volta, Colonel Gabriel Somé Yorian and infantry soldiers loyal to the Mossi chiefs, and favoring relations with Cote d'Ivoire and France, captured key installations (radio stations, military garrisons and the presidential palace) and arrested Saye Zerbo. Many citizens were uncertain as to who would emerge from this volatile crisis caused by trade union protests against prolonged military intervention in civilian politics.

Zerbo's *Comité Militaire de Redressement pour le Progrès National* (CMRPN- Military Committee for Recovery for National Progress) and the national army (diverse in ideology and growing in influence) fought for the support of the politically diverse civilian parties. As Englebert has observed, the "soldiers saw themselves [as] capable of

⁴ B.F.Skinner, *The Mossi of Burkina Faso*, 214.

⁵ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 54.

correcting the policies of other soldiers.”⁶ The position of president in the Upper Volta after Lamizana was weakened. In the eyes of many, the president appeared to be a figurehead in the executive branch of government. The role of president became a fragile one given the failure of a diverse group of people in the country to reach a consensus on various issues.

Conservative forces in the army under the direction of Commandant Gabriel Some Yorian answered the demands of the Unions. Frustrated by their exclusion from Zerbo’s thirty-one member military and civilian regime, Yorian and his supporters came to the aid of Zerbo’s political rivals to have him removed from power. Trade unions were not pleased with Zerbo’s anti-protest and party banning politics. Within hours following the successful coup, the first *Conseil de Salut du Peuple* (Council for Salvation in People-CSP-I) was established with one-hundred and twenty members representing both civilians and soldiers.

The CSP-I regime was established by Yorian following his successful coup against President Zerbo. After the coup, Médecin-Commandant Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo was installed by the coup leaders as president and to accomplish two short-term goals. The first was to play a balancing game by appointing commissioned and non-commissioned officers of the national army to serve government positions. Second, Ouédraogo reshuffled the cabinet to incorporate younger officers of the army. Both measures were pursued to appease the growing political ideological left within the national army that included young soldiers such as Sankara. These short-term objectives did not satisfy the long-term goals of progressive (socialist and/or communist leaning) forces within the military. These progressive forces wanted a cleansing of the Upper

⁶ Ibid, 54.

Volta government of all conservative (democratic, pro-western) and reactionary (ideologically right leaning) forces.

The presidency of Médicin-Commandant Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo covered a period of roughly 10 months with Col. Some Yorian secretly serving as the policy maker. It was characterized by ideological disagreements with the civilian population over the political destiny of the nation and the place and purpose of the military in national politics. Within the army, there were two opposing ideological groups who disagreed over how the country should be governed. Conservatives supported the power of Mossi chiefs and civilian political groups and radical soldiers supported communist and/ or socialist styled government. In the course of 1983, three characters personified the divisions over policy within the army. A conservative army colonel in Some Yorian launched a coup against the Zerbo regime with the aim to restore Yameogo to power. Following the successful coup on 25 November 1982, Yorian installed his conservative ally and realist in the army medical doctor Médicin Commandant Jean-Baptiste, to hold the position of president of Upper Volta.

Captain Thomas Noel Sankara, a radical idealist, was selected by the coup leaders to hold the high post of prime minister. This was done to appease civilians and soldiers who supported Sankara's progressive (radical) ideas. These two men (Ouédraogo and Sankara) occupied the higher positions in a politically fragile CSP (I) regime until Sankara's resignation and subsequent house arrest on 17 May 1983. Shy and soft-spoken, Jean-Baptiste, a Mossi, pursued Yorian's agenda of preparing laws that could allow the return of Yameogo to the presidency, a policy pursued after Sankara's removal from politics on 17 May 1983. This date also officially begins the CSP II (a regime purged of

the radical representation by conservatives). In the months leading to the August revolution of 1983, the president (Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo) reinstated the press and union freedoms that were suspended following the November 1982 coup as a way to win popularity and gain legitimacy with the people. His move did strengthen his popularity with the people. However, that inadvertently allowed Sankara to build his political career as a soldier and politician following his house-arrest on 17 May 1983.⁷

These new freedoms allowed by the CSP II regime (Ouédraogo still president with Sankara no longer the prime minister) empowered the press and the teachers' and other workers' unions to advocate for more freedom. Ouédraogo also released political prisoners (while keeping Sankara under house arrest). By lifting the ban on pro-conservative/democratic strikes, the CSP conservatives hoped to win the loyalty of large numbers of people, particularly those who wanted the Upper Volta to return to a democratic state. However, in doing so, their political rivals (radical/ socialist and/or communists) also gained popularity with the people. These people, primarily composed of low wage earners and the poor, were represented by groups such as the Lipad (Patriotic League for African Development) and the ULC (The Union of Communist Struggles). Supporters of Sankara saw a man who wanted to transform Upper Volta completely for the betterment of not just those in the government but for all citizens.

Sankara, an ethnic Silmi-Mossi (a cross between Mossi and Fulani) was born in Yako, a city west of the capital Ouagadougou on 21 December 1949. He was the son of a former World War II soldier of Mossi ethnic descent and a woman from the ethnic Fulani.⁸ Following WWII, Sambo Joseph Sankara (1919-2006), Thomas' father, a

⁷ Ibid, 54.

⁸ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 56.

catholic by faith, was employed by the French colonial government as a postal clerk. Joseph Sankara's job required a great deal of travel and his son Thomas was able to see different cities at an early age that may have influenced his political orientation. Marguerite Sankara, Thomas' mother, worked equally hard to provide for him and his nine other siblings. Sankara's family mobility helped to enhance Thomas' geographical knowledge of the nation because he knew the country well. Through this opportunity of travel, Thomas Sankara and his family may have gained a greater appreciation for Upper Volta's ethnic diversity beyond their hometown. Perhaps those relationships with various people in his travels as a child with a catholic upbringing may have shaped Sankara's socialist aspirations.

Sankara went to primary school in Gaoua and attended high school in Bobo-Dioulasso. His parents wanted him to become a priest but he insisted on joining the country's military. According to Pierre Englebert, in the year of the country's first coup (1966), seventeen year old Thomas Sankara studied and received his baccalaureate at the Kadiogo military cadet school in the capital Ouagadougou.⁹ History professor and Lipad (Patriotic League for African Development) member Amadou Touré may have been the first to introduce Sankara to Socialist, Marxist, and Communist teachings.¹⁰

Stationed at the Antsirabe military academy in Madagascar from 1970 to 1973, Sankara witnessed the rise of socialism there led by students and unions as he had in his teenage years in the Upper Volta when student and union protests prompted Yaméogo's overthrow (1966). He returned to his home country in 1974 to fight in what was to be the

⁹ Ibid, 56.

¹⁰ Ibid, 56.

first border “war” with Mali.¹¹ In the course of the six years (1974-1980) leading up to his first government position of Secretary of State under General Saye Zerbo, Sankara’s charisma grew. He was viewed by many in the country as a war hero through his appointment to Commander of the military garrison at Pô by Zerbo in 1976.¹² Sankara gained the favor of left-wing political groups.

Sankara’s initial anti-conformist, anti-capitalist, pro-revolutionary stance attracted many disenchanted youth from the streets to rally behind his idealism. Much of Sankara's support came from the youth in villages. They found his personal and family life appealing. Sankara’s personal popularity grew in 1981 when he was appointed by Zerbo to serve as Secretary of State. Within a few months of holding that office, Sankara resigned in the spring of 1982 when he denounced wage cuts for poorer civilians by the government. Sankara could relate to the majority of the economically disadvantaged in the country who worked hard for too little. His life in the Upper Volta must have been shaped by the many travels he made across the country with his father who was a postal clerk and career soldier. Sankara’s experiences in the military also helped to shape his progressive views.

Before the revolution, Sankara was not pleased with the destiny of Upper Volta Republic. The system of government was corrupt.¹³ With the exception of Lamizana and Sankara, all presidents of Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) were ethnic Mossi. Lamizana was an ethnic Samo minority and Sankara was a Silmi-Mossi (a mix between Mossi and Peul). With the exception of Sankara, all presidents worked to preserve the Mossi

¹¹ Ibid, 56.

¹² Ibid, 56.

¹³ B.F.Skinner. *The Mossi of Burkian Faso*, 1.

dominance in politics. Neighboring Côte d'Ivoire and distant France had looked to the ethnic Mossi as the legitimate power in the country (Burkina Faso) and worked to maintain relationships with the wealthy peoples such as village chiefs in the ethnic group. The Mossi were the first choice as trade partners for foreign entrepreneurs. It was these kinds of political patronage that Sankara's revolution was aimed at uprooting. It is, therefore not surprising that the August Revolution was hailed by many in Burkina Faso.

Robert Melson sees revolutions as "necessary...just because the old regimes were invariably based on patterns of domination."¹⁴ Revolts are political processes that have a common history. Praetorian rule was common in West Africa in the 1980's. Burkina Faso was not exempt from how many African nations were governed. In order to receive aid from the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the WB (World Bank), many leaders in West African nation-states were required to install or uphold democratic institutions in their countries. One of the ways of receiving aid was to achieve the appearance of a transparent nation in the eyes of "first-world" (developed) nations. Host nations ("third-world" countries) would admit foreign assistance in the form of government and non-governmental development programs.¹⁵

All presidencies prior to Sankara's claimed a swift return to civilian controlled politics and stood behind their French and Ivoirian allies and investors. Calls for democracy by presidents before Sankara were aimed to please and reassure the safety of foreign investors. As a result, foreign aid from these countries to (Upper Volta) before Sankara and Burkina Faso was much higher in proportion to the aid received between the years 1983 to 1987. For example, foreign aid from France "fell from 43.5 million in 1983

¹⁴ Robert Melson, *Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 258.

¹⁵ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 160.

to 26.8 million in 1985.” Sankara’s revolution stressed the importance of self-reliance through the local organization and resource sharing. As a result, the president’s ambitions for local development, particularly in the early years of the revolution (1983 to 1985), witnessed cuts in foreign aid and programs.¹⁶

The Revolution in Burkina Faso was in many ways a reaction to what has become a monetary reward for making multi-party democracy the only system of governance. It was also a reaction to the failures of previous regimes in the Upper Volta to provide equal opportunities for sharing the resources and land of the country.¹⁷ For example, Yameogo used government funds to celebrate his second marriage with trips to Paris and Brazil.¹⁸

It can also be argued here that the rise of revolutionary sentiment in the Upper Volta occurred when Sankara was appointed by Major Jean-Baptisté Ouédraogo to serve as Prime Minister in the spring of 1983. As Prime Minister, Sankara pushed for diplomatic relations with Algeria, Libya, North Korea, Ghana and Nicaragua.¹⁹ These nations did not have any diplomatic relations with Upper Volta prior to Sankara’s appointment. Sankara wished to ally Upper Volta with these nations because he felt that they shared similar experiences with colonialism (whether it be Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch or English). But Sankara did not serve in this position for a longer period. He was removed from office on 17 May 1983. On the same day, the more conservative Council of Salvation in People (CSP II) regime was formed. It worked until 4 August

¹⁶ Ibid, 152.

¹⁷ Thomas Sankara, *Thomas Sankara Speaks: the Burkina Faso Revolution 1983-87*, 46-48.

¹⁸ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 46.

¹⁹ Ibid, 152-155.

1983 to release and reinstate previous political figures like Yameogo in power. That did not please many civilians and a (politically radical) segment of the military.

Prior to 4 August 1983, students and workers protested, demanding Sankara's release from house arrest. On the afternoon of this day, Captain Blaisé Compaoré, the commander of the garrison at Pô and a close friend of Sankara's since 1976, organized two-hundred soldiers to capture key installations in Ouagadougou. In the evening of 4 August 1983, soldiers loyal to Compaoré captured the radio station in Ouagadougou, key garrisons and the presidential palace and announced the release of Sankara and the establishment of a national revolution with Sankara as its leader.

Samuel Decalo has argued in his *Coups and Army Rule in Africa* (1990) that two reasons account for military coups in post-colonial Africa. The first is that fraudulent democratic institutions plagued by "social, economic, and political problems" attract military rule. The second is that the military has become the force that reasserts 'integrity' in systems of government.²⁰ The Burkina Faso example (surprisingly not included in Decalo's work) is no different from the analysis he offers. Sankara's military regime was in many ways a top-down rule. Nevertheless, what distinguishes Sankara's from other similar military regimes in the continent in the 1980's was the attempt to organize actions to meet the rhetoric toward uplifting women, cleaning up the environment and reforming the government (among many other issues such as health and education).

The architects of the August Revolution not only claimed to act on behalf of the people in the country, they tried to physically organize citizens to complete the tasks

²⁰ Samuel Decalo, *Coups & Army Rule in Africa: Motivations & Constraints*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 124.

(though reminiscent of French colonial labor practices). They waged a war against the historical circumstances identified by them in the country. They were against the wealthy, chiefdoms (traditional rule), and corrupt politicians. Sankara and his followers moved to direct national attention away from president Ouédraogo's demands for a return to "a new normal constitutional life" toward a popular revolt against traditional political, social, and economic life in the Upper Volta.²¹

In the spring of 1983, Upper Volta (Burkina Faso as of 1984) established new relations with Libya, the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization), Cuba, and Nicaragua under Prime Minister Sankara. Following the August 4 coup, Sankara's first act was to renegotiate and strengthen those relations with the revolutionary government. Sankara wanted the Upper Volta to identify with only the peoples and countries that did not want to continue diplomatic relations with France. The revolutionaries pointed to the historical 'injustices' of French colonialism imposed on their people as the sole reason and justification for Sankara and his followers wanting to end diplomatic relations with France.

The 4 August 1983 coup occurred in an already stratified society. Sankara and others made efforts to remedy the problem of ethnic politics in Upper Volta particularly the exploitive interactions between local Mossi chiefdoms and Upper Volta's military. A Sankara led presidency tried to move beyond what Englebert considered "a dull and marginal nation at the periphery of the world" to make Upper Volta "the new child prodigy of anti-imperialism, Third World pride, and development."²²

²¹ B.F. Skinner, *The Mossi of Burkina Faso*. 227.

²² *Ibid*, 151.

Chapter Three:

Sankara's Revolution: Revolutionaries Burkina Faso (1983-1987)

This chapter looks at what the revolutionary government of Captain Thomas Sankara did to transform the Upper Volta (into Burkina Faso) to address the various social, political and economic issues facing the country. Victoria Brittain has suggested that “the August revolution represented people’s seizure of power” by a segment of the military acting on their behalf than a mere army takeover.¹ For her, the coup plotters under the command of Captain Blaisé Compaoré in Pô, acted on behalf of a distressed segment of the general population. In heeding their cries for the release of Sankara and other political prisoners, Compaoré led over 200 soldiers out of Pô north of Ouagadougou to overthrow forces loyal to president Ouedraogo.

Blaisé Compaoré’s paratrooper squads proceeded to release Thomas Sankara from house arrest in Ouagadougou. On that evening (4 August 1983), Sankara and Compaoré captured the radio station in Ouagadougou and serenaded civilians with military music. Shortly after, the revolutionaries proclaimed the triumph of the *Conseil National de la Révolution* (CNR-Consul of the National Revolution) and a curfew was announced.

The *Organization Militaire Révolutionnaire* (ORM-Revolutionary Military Organization), the nuclei of the CNR, consisted of Thomas Sankara, Blaise Compaoré, Boukary Lingani, and Henry Zongo. This governing body saw a need to develop the

¹ Victoria Brittain, “Introduction to Sankara and Burkina Faso,” 45.

country's government not on the periphery of French civilization or on the exploitive tendencies of the ethnic Mossi, but on a new mentality that called people to show power, share power, and to identify with and break away from those that exploited them. Arguably, this self-reliant politics was not started by Sankara but he was eager to uphold it. Unlike previous regimes in the country, the CNR lacked a precise ideology.²

Yet, the coup leaders embraced the equal distribution of resources policies inherent in both communist and socialist ideologies. The junta was committed to building in Burkina Faso, an egalitarian society. Moreover, Sankara's government moved swiftly to reorient the country's ideological stance in international affairs for the purpose of re-establishing relations with Nicaragua, Cuba, Libya, and the Palestinians first established by him when he served as Prime Minister in 1982. This move served two purposes. First, it presented Burkina Faso as a champion of its own political destiny as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement outside of the influences of the French and the Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire). Second, Burkina Faso joined a growing number of 'third-world' nations that did not declare an alliance with the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia (formally the Soviet Union), and China in the late Cold War period.

The revolutionaries envisioned themselves as the saviors of Upper Volta. They wanted to free the Burkinabe from the torment posed by debts owed to French and Ivorian governments and private investors. They considered themselves the architects of a new politics aimed at fighting against "imperialism."³ Sankara opposed nations that used force to make people to serve their social, economic and political purposes. Sankara's speeches acknowledged that Burkina Faso had conformed for too long but

² Rene Otayek, "The Revolutionary Process in Burkina Faso," 87.

³ Thomas Sankara, *Thomas Sankara Speaks*, 30.

would no longer do so in a world shaped by the interest of Britain, France, Russia, China, and the United States.⁴

On 2 October 1983, the *Discours d'orientation politique* (DOP-Orientation of Political Discourse), authored by Valère Somé, a close associate and ally of Sankara, was broadcast on public radio that day. The document presented Upper Volta as history in the typical framework of a society steeped in class conflict. Perhaps the object was to present the revolution as the legitimate Marxist response to this particular socio-economic condition. The document opens by praising the “triumph” of the August coup. Next, the speech compares Upper Volta’s struggles against French imperialism to those of other countries in the world such as Vietnam and Algeria.⁵ The document viewed the poor and their struggles as the legitimate objective of revolutionary change. The poor as a category, included students, peasants, and political dissidents of previous regimes.

This document encouraged people to form local *Comités de Défense de la Révolution* (CDR-Committees for the Defense of the Revolution) to defend the revolution from reactionary forces. It also aimed to unite these *new* social forces (in these CDRs) to combat corruption in the country by reforming the administration.⁶

The document identifies the wealthy classes as potential “enemies of the people” by assuming their alliances with wealthy “imperialist” nations abroad particularly France and Cote d’Ivoire. True to the spirit of the document, the military regime identified itself and the poor as “the people” and regarded both as the revolutionary vanguard. The rest of society that did not fall into these strict categories was left to choose a side, whether to be

⁴Thomas Sankara, *Thomas Sankara Speaks*, 41.

⁵Thomas Sankara, *We are heirs of the world’s revolutions*, 31-34.

⁶Thomas Sankara, *Thomas Sankara Speaks*, 41.

with the “people” or to become “enemies of the people.” The regime’s *Comités de Défense de la Révolution* (CDR-Committees for the Defense of the Revolution), were initially composed of unemployed youth, elders, women and anyone else identifying with low or no income earners. Their task was to create and carry out programs of development that will meet the needs of their communities.

Along with the call for the creation of CDRs, the DOP document also set new roles for the military and women in the economy of revolutionary Burkina Faso. The military put itself at the service of the revolutionary vanguard (the poor) with specific set of rules to follow alongside with the local CDR(s). What made Sankara’s revolution compelling and genuine was the effort to right the wrongs of its national history in two ways. First, Sankara identified the majority of the population, women, as equal partners of the revolution’s struggle against oppression. Second, that Sankara made a commitment to include them in decision making. The revolutionary government divided the economy into four sectors for reform: agrarian, administrative, educational, and production. This work will focus on three areas in which Sankara’s revolutionary policies reformed the national government, raised awareness and improved the environment (a sub component of his agrarian reform), and restructured gender issues and relations.

The young revolutionary leaders believed in their ability to change their country for the better compared to their political predecessors. First, they did not want the rest of the world to see their coup as a typical military intervention. So, they presented their coup as a popular uprising aimed at serving two purposes. First, to repudiate Ouedraogo’s regime and all the others for their inability to provide political peace and coherency among the various ethnic and political groups in the country following independence (5

August 1960). Second, they wanted to prove to the public that this military leadership identified with their disapproval of the government by making it their mission to take charge in reforming the exercise of political power.

They immediately pursued politics aimed at improving and protecting the lives of all citizens as opposed to upholding the self-indulgent policies of previous military regimes. Sankara aimed to accomplish many issues under his presidency concerning health, education, environment, gender equality and economy. Sankara and the revolutionaries moved to reorganize the national government into one that represented the aspirations of all parties (with particular favor for those leaning to the ideological left). They also focused on the environment and devised quick solutions to help curb degradation. Furthermore, Sankara championed the rights of women. Finally, they banned local chiefs from receiving tributes economic and/or service from their subjects.

Sankara used his personal profile: military exploits with Mali (1974), as Secretary of Defense (1981) and as Prime Minister (1982) to inspire people. These achievements, coupled with an ideological mesh of Marxist-Leninist and catholic beliefs, set him apart from his colleagues. A majority of Sankara's colleagues followed the Islamic faith, one shared by 90 percent of the country. Nevertheless, these Muslim revolutionaries and their Christian leader worked to build a self-reliant country based not on the historical commercial relations with Upper Volta's regional (Cote D'Ivoire) and global (French) partners, but a country that drew upon the hard-work of its workers and peasants.⁷ Quite simply, the revolutionaries aimed to create an egalitarian society in Burkina Faso by first setting the example as military men.

⁷ Elliot B Skinner, *The Mossi of Burkina Faso*, 218.

Captain Thomas Sankara and his colleagues attempted to establish (or invent) a nation of people living against the tradition of dependence on foreign aid. The battle to maintain a government focused exclusively on self-sufficiency, literacy, and meeting basic needs with transparent leadership did not last. Nevertheless, the four years and two months of this revolutionary regime was a striking example of government accountability to the people never seen in the Upper Volta. Before the August coup, political incumbents under previous regimes used their positions to serve private interests as opposed to collective civilian needs.

Sankara was the first head of state in Upper Volta to use government to reduce the social, political and economic disparities between ordinary citizens and political elites. He tried to accomplish this through austerity measures and organizational strategies. A key action taken by the Sankara government was an austerity measure that called for the reduction of civil servant salaries. For him, it was simply a matter of demanding fairness from those who enjoyed “champagne” and giving some relief to those who drank only water.⁸ The initiatives undertaken by Sankara in the initial stages of the CNR and CDRs presented hope for a people ravaged by environmental disasters and social corruption. The revolutionaries opposed private business, a practice all too common in post independent Africa among political elites. They strove to establish their regime as an alternative approach in Africa toward African nation building without Western donors and investors.

⁸ Ibid, 225.

It is important to note that the French colony of Upper Volta had served as a human labor reserve.⁹ Cote d'Ivoire and Mali had relied on these migrant laborers from the Upper Volta to build and repair railways, roads and bridges for regional resource extraction by France. The government under Sankara moved to control and shift Upper Volta's economic resources and labor force away from foreign development demands to refocus them on meeting the basic needs of all Burkinabe citizens.

Nevertheless, not all of the people of the country participated in Sankara's economic, political and social revolution or even appreciated it. In the education sector, there were teachers, administrators, and students who were affected by the revolutionary government's salary and tuition cuts. In the private sector, business and land owners lost land in the government's land nationalization policy which took effect in the spring of 1984. Chiefs (traditional rulers) were not supportive of Sankara's policies against monetary tributes to and obligatory labors performed for them.

In the weeks following their usurpation of the government's executive powers, leaders of the CNR allied themselves with the *Union des Luttes Communistes* (ULC-Union of Communists Struggles) and the *Ligue Patriotique pour le Développement* (Lipad-Patriotic League for Development) parties. The CNR launched its own administrative reforms. They moved to condemn and remove the practices of previous political regimes, namely the domination of the nation's politics by the ethnic Mossi. Sankara and his military revolutionaries intended to direct their country away from what he and others in his camp perceived as "twenty-three years of imperialist exploitation and

⁹ For more information concerning Burkinabe emigrants to other countries in West Africa for work, please see Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 23-24 and 111-112.

domination” under the previous leaders. In doing so, he challenged the policies and programs that had hitherto been pursued in the country.

On the social front, Sankara believed the existing state institutions failed to benefit the many ethnic groups in the country. He wished to champion, in Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), a national consensus through the establishment of a one party state, environmental preservation, and women’s rights. Sankara wanted to move his country away from foreign economic models that previous regimes adopted to keep receiving aid and shift the national economy to one of self-reliance. Politically, the junta leaders of the 1983 revolution promised to deliver to all citizens ethnic and economic equality that democratic and multiparty processes had failed to achieve for the nation in the previous years.

The new regime shifted the national priorities from “the protection of individual rights and liberties” to collective ownership of national resources. It stressed the need for more sovereignty and less reliance on aid resources from France, Cote D’Ivoire, and other French-speaking West African nations. Sankara’s government sought to restructure the institutions of the state to guarantee food and shelter to many people in Burkina Faso.

The first order of business for the Sankara regime was to reform the government. This was a daunting task given the country’s history of tense relations between civilian political parties and the military. Victoria Brittain’s interviews with Mohamed Maiga in December 1983, a Malian journalist for *Afrique Asia* in the country at the time, reveals the struggles for power between conservative and radical civilian and military forces and the infighting between radicals in the military and civilian groups such as the Ligue

Patriotique pour le Développement (Lipad- Patriotic League for Development) over appointment to government posts.¹⁰

To resolve what the military leaders saw as divisions at home, the revolutionary government put part of the national policy decisions in the hands of CDR's made up of groups the government described as the "people." These were the poor, women and youth in the Upper Volta (declared Burkina Faso on August 1984), many of whom had *poor* relations with "enemies of the people" (wealthy classes) prior to and during the revolution. One of the first examples that Captain Thomas Sankara and his colleagues did upon their rise to power in the Upper Volta and that distinguished them from other coups in this period was their fight against corruption in the administration. This was achieved two ways.

The *Tribunaux Populaires de la Révolution* (TPR-Popular Revolutionary Tribunals) was established shortly of the coup in October 1983. Rhetorically, it was intended to operate as a people's court in that it allowed the "genuine participation...of toiling and exploited masses in the administration." In action, the TPR was intended to replace the country's French-modeled judicial system. It took the shape of "five CDR members, one soldier, and a magistrate" without the presence of lawyers nor due process. The TPR's tried, convicted, and/or acquitted many for embezzlement, fraud, and other actions the courts deemed offensive.¹¹ Previous heads of state were brought before TPRs. Lamizana (1966-1980) was acquitted of charges, Ouedraogo(1982) and Ki-Zerbo(Prime

¹⁰ Victoria Brittain, "An Introduction to Thomas Sankara and the Burkinabe Revolution," 44-45.

¹¹ Jimmy D Kandeh, *Coups from Below*, 129.

Minister under Lamizana from 1969-1973) was fined and Zerbo received a 15 year sentence for the corruption charges brought against them.¹²

The second reform in administration was the creation of the *Commission du Peuple pour la Prevention de la Corruption* (CPPC-Commission of People for the Prevention of Corruption). This commission aimed to prevent corruption by requiring top officials of government (Sankara included) to present a record of their assets and personal earnings.¹³ This was not a huge practice in sub-Saharan African nation-states in the 1980's. The commission revealed that Sankara's holdings as president were modest. He earned a low presidential salary and owned few possessions as his lifestyle seemed to reflect frugality over luxury.

The revolutionary military regime under Thomas Sankara violated the DOP speech's agreement to civilians by appointing an American and French-trained Captain Pierre Ouedraogo (no relation to former president Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo), an ethnic Mossi, to the important position of Secretary General of the CDR's over the civilian political group Lipad's choice of trade union leader Soumane Touré. This choice did not please the civilian supporters of the military regime and Lipad members expressed their displeasure to foreign media such as *The Guardian*, *Radio France*, and *Agency Presse France*. After a foiled right-wing counter-revolutionary coup in the summer of 1984 (the first launched against Sankara's government), seven plotters were summarily executed and two Lipad leaders were detained for their alleged ties to the perpetrators. In this period, known as "clarification," the military, perhaps lacking trust in the civilian political elements following the first countercoup attempt, asserted itself to lead the

¹² Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 59-60.

¹³ Kandeh, *Coups from Below*, 128.

civilian political parties on all issues raised in the DOP speech. This resulted in the withdrawal of the socialist oriented Lipad party from its participation in the revolution.¹⁴

The exit of Lipad from the revolutionary government gave more power to the remaining civilian pro-revolutionary political groups, especially the *Union des Luttes Communistes* (ULC-The Union of the Communist Struggle). For the military, this new political reality allowed Sankara, Compaoré, Lingani and Zongo to create new political parties such as the *Union des Femmes du Burkina* (UFB-Union of Burkinabe Women) and the *Union Nationale des Anciens du Burkina* (UNAB-the National Union of Elders in Burkina Faso). These newly created parties were pro-revolutionary in stance. The military leaders “left no social stratum untouched” in making themselves the creators of a new political structure in Burkina Faso.¹⁵

On 4 August 1984, Sankara nationalized all lands. This radical measure served two-purposes, one, to disrupt “the power of traditional chiefs,” and to increase grain production by shifting management power to peasant farmers. Prior to the revolution, all peoples, rich and poor, had access to land but, they did not have “control over and management of” lands in the country. Englebert describes the pre-revolutionary land use as a system that functioned in near autarky for resources produced for local consumption.¹⁶

Mossi farmers worked with their families and their use of land with other ethnic groups were communal in the production of goods for local consumption. Sankara gave the land and the power of managing it to the “people” (those poor classes in Burkina

¹⁴ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 45-46.

¹⁵ Ibid, 59.

¹⁶ Ibid, 83.

Faso) The results (particularly for cotton) in the early years of the revolution (1983 to 1985) from the government's land reforms were favorable as producer prices rose being that lands were easier to access for the poor majority following legislation.¹⁷

The revolutionaries also addressed the issues facing the environment, that of desertification and drought. In April of 1985, they launched the "three struggles" ('tree' struggles) program. The first and second "struggles" aimed to combat bush fires and arbitrary wood cutting.¹⁸ Those caught in the act of either starting bush fires or cutting trees down without authorization had to either pay fines, serve jail time and/or plant trees. The third of the "three struggles" program launched a national tree planting campaign, declaring that "every happy event...is celebrated with a tree planting ceremony."¹⁹

When a couple got married, they had to plant a tree. When nomads were caught in the act of violating the government's environmental laws, they were made to plant trees. For all occasions, citizens were strongly recommended to plant trees to help restore the environment. No other government prior to Sankara's had stressed the importance of the environment along with policy and courses of action toward slowing environmental degradation.

The acknowledgement of women as equal partners in Burkina Faso's revolution is perhaps the hallmark of the Sankara regime in regards to the CNR's sincerity in attempting to fulfill the promises made to citizens. The regime created educational programs on female circumcision practices, appointed women to government positions,

¹⁷ Ibid, 92.

¹⁸ Bruno Jaffré. trans. Barry Smerin, "Biography of Thomas Sankara: Burkina Faso's Pure President," Thomas Sankara WebSite. N.p., 25 Mar. 2008. Web. Summer 2012.
<http://www.thomassankara.net/spip.php?page=imprimer_articulo&id_article=555&lang=fr>.

¹⁹ Samantha Anderson, *We Are Heirs To The World's Revolutions*, 86.

and recruited more women into the army. Sankara's policies banned and criminalized female circumcision in Burkina Faso's Muslim society, forced marriages and polygamy while creating and placing women in places of power where they were previously absent. Sankara created the country's first Ministry of Family Development.²⁰ The ministry dedicated its services to educating Burkinabe women on home economics, effective child-rearing, and AIDS awareness and prevention (to name three).

Issues such as Sankara's decision to ban and criminalize female circumcision received strong reaction from civilians given that ninety per cent of the population practiced the Islamic faith. The revolution disrupted this cultural and religious practice for two reasons. One, Sankara wanted to cut the powers of traditional leaders and reinforce the authority of the revolutionaries. The second was to modernize the conditions of women in the country in accordance with the tenets of United Nations conventions on the dignified treatment of women.²¹

The regime also created a national day for gender role swap on October 8 and a week (Week of the Women) first held in 1985 to commemorate the women of Burkina Faso. Sankara created the *Union des femmes Burkina* (UFB-Union of Burkina Women) in 1985. The UFB gave women a political place "within the well-defined bounds of the revolution" by allowing them to voice their issues with the men.²² The government desired to elevate the status of women beyond the boundaries of previous regimes by appointing "five women to ministerial positions" (names not listed) along with promoting

²⁰ Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 140-141.

²¹ For details on the convention for universal women's rights, please see the Convention On The Elimination Of All Forms Of Discrimination Against Women.

²² Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, 141.

the idea of having husbands pay wives half of their salaries.²³ The Political Orientation Discourse (DOP) defined women as equal partners in the revolution. Women no longer served men as they were equal partners in an effort to reform government, environment, economy, and gender relationships. For the first time in Burkina Faso, national leaders considered the importance of women's issues by attempting to address and inform the public about them.

The battle to maintain a government focused exclusively on self-sufficiency, literacy, and meeting basic needs with transparent leadership did not last. Nevertheless, the four years and two months of this revolutionary regime was a striking example of government accountability to the people never seen in the Upper Volta. Before the August coup, political incumbents under previous regimes used their positions to serve private interests as opposed to collective civilian needs aside from the regimes increasingly autocratic methods toward achieving these goals as 1987 approached. Nevertheless, the country in these years (1983-1987) witnessed mass organization, the elevation of health, a positive promotion of gender relations, rising education, economic frugality (slight growth as a result) and vast small scale development projects. Burkina appeared to be on the path to self-sufficiency but not without quarrels as to how the revolution must proceed.

²³ Jimmy Kandeh, *Coups from Below*, 130.

Conclusion

On 15 October 1987, acting on behalf of groups disenchanted with the direction of revolution in the country, Blasé Compaoré, Sankara's closest friend, and initiator of the 4 August coup, launched another coup from the military garrison in Pô that put Sankara in power four years earlier. That Thursday afternoon, Sankara was gunned down with twelve of his advisors after a short fierce fire-fight. Their bodies were cremated and placed in make-shift graves. The leadership, persona and radical nature of the revolution in Burkina Faso ended with Sankara's murder. Three days following this successful (third) counter-revolution in Burkina Faso, Compaoré came out of mourning and claimed the CNR presidency. In the course of the first four years of his (Compaoré's) regime, Burkina Faso witnessed a brutal end of Sankara's radical politics.

What can be learned from the Revolution that took place in Burkina Faso from 1983 to 1987? The revolutionaries found in the political upheavals of the early 1980's, an opportunity to help make a new society out of the old ethnic configurations in the Upper Volta. Sankara's government tried to use the national government as an instrument for addressing pressing issues by empowering all civilians to face them head-on.

Sankara's regime saw itself as the pioneer of alternative (against foreign recommendations) models for development in the Upper Volta. His populist revolution aimed to share power between the military and civilian population. In reality, it was a segment of the military dictating to society its aspirations of how civility should operate politically, socially, economically and, (even) morally. Regarded as a unique form of

military-led egalitarianism, this populist revolution attracted civilian support through organized mass rallies that praised the government and its (reforming) policies. One can conclude that this was a necessary alliance between civilians and the military to legitimize a revolutionary agenda aimed at developing a permanent break with the political baggage associated with the pre-revolutionary, colonial, and traditional (Mossi) structures of power.

Sankara's administration initiated agrarian reforms such as fighting deforestation with tree planting initiatives and raising grain production through land nationalization policy. Thomas Sankara fought government corruption with accountability through the creation of his Commission of People for the Prevention of Corruption (CPPC) and the Popular Revolutionary Tribunals (TPR). He gave government mobility with constant cabinet shuffles, civil servant appointments to rural villages as a means to relate politics to 'real' people while discouraging politicians from holding longer office terms. He tried to make politics in Burkina Faso relevant to all citizens through the formation and encouragement of civilian participation in the CDR's (Committees for the Defense of the Revolution). In a way, he tried to expand the role of government by including all civilians in the development of political processes. In the course of four years and two months, the revolutionary government touched the lives of many civilians through tree planting ceremonies and mass involvement in national decision making through popular tribunals (the TPR(s)-Popular Revolutionary Tribunals), and the empowerment of women.

Despite the huge strides made in these three key areas in Burkina Faso: administration, environment, and women's issues. Nevertheless, public dissent gained ground. This is partly attributed to the regime's suppression of anti-revolutionary

sentiment among other shortcomings. The goal of these anti-revolutionary forces to end the revolution and restore their brand of democracy gained momentum as power slowly slipped from Sankara.

SNEAVH (the National Syndicate for African Teachers of the Upper Volta) was perhaps the most outspoken and openly critical of the revolution. Within the first week of the August 1983 coup, this teacher's union, with strong ties to groups outside of Burkina Faso (namely Cote d'Ivoire), aimed to achieve two objectives in defiance of the revolutionary regime. One, members criticized the new regime's rise to power in the effort to reinforce the need for traditional civilian politicians in national politics. This was achieved through petitions to the United Nations (UN), *Communauté Economique d'Afrique de l'Ouest* (CEAO-the English translation is ECOWAS or the Economic Community of West African States), along with other local, regional, or international bodies. Two, SNEAVH unionists used protest to avoid cutting union member salaries. They considered Sankara's coup an illegitimate change in the country's governance and publicly denounced and withdrew their support from the revolutionary regime in the fall of 1983.

Within months, groups joined forces with SNEAVH. Lipad (the League for Patriotic Development) lost favor with the revolution following the group's failure, in 1984, to convince Sankara appoint more civilian politicians into key offices of national government. In Burkina Faso's revolutionary years, political parties left out of the revolutionary government such as SNEAVH and Lipad groups slowly gained control of local CNR's across the country and worked hard to destroy them. It was clear that toward the fourth year of the revolution, the military had lost support from a majority of the

civilian population. Most civilians may have been disillusioned with the promises made by Sankara in the DOP (Revolutionary Political Discourse) speech. The promise of power sharing between civilians and the military as the key action of administrative reform was not kept when the military decided to appoint their own soldiers to positions reserved for civilian revolutionaries such as that of the position of the Secretary General of the Consul of the National Revolution.

Civilians had their choice in trade union leader Soumane Touré for the position but the military appointed, contrary to the wishes of civilian parties, a Captain Pierre Ouedraogo. SNEAVH and Lipad orchestrated anti-government trade-union protests following the revolutionary government's decision to suspend their participation in politics after their alleged ties to coups against the Sankara government. The protests were often staged within CDR's by those forces that managed to infiltrate and take charge of them. The anti-revolutionary protests were often repressed and violently by the Sankara regime. That undermined Sankara's popularity with the people. Public outcry against these actions also led the CNR to create new political alliances (parties) such as the UFB (Union of Burkinabe Women) and the UNAB (National Union of Elders in Burkina Faso) to replace groups that were once pro-revolutionary. The Burkinabe Revolution came to a sad end upon Sankara's death on 15 October 1987.

Nearly thirty years have passed since Sankara's revolution in Burkina Faso. Yet, his legacy speaks louder than ever. His modest tomb bearing the painted revolutionary flag remains routinely visited by local villagers. Sankara's death on October 15, 1987, adds to a long list of presidents in "third-world" countries that led revolutions in their respective countries with aspirations that survived their assassinations. The revolution in

Burkina Faso attempted to reform a post-colonial nation-state. The government's agrarian reforms included land nationalization (lands given to peasant farmers) and a "three-struggles" program to eradicate deforestation and drought with nation-wide tree planting initiatives. The revolutionary government brought women's (gender) issues that had taken a backseat in the pre-revolutionary period to the fore-front of politics by outlawing female circumcision and banning forced marriages and polygamy.

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