

A Certain Amount of Madness

A Certain Amount of Madness

The Life, Politics and Legacies of
Thomas Sankara

Edited by Amber Murrey

Foreword by Horace Campbell

Afterword by Aziz Salmone Fall

PLUTO  **PRESS**

First published 2018 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3758 6 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 3757 9 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0224 8 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0226 2 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0225 5 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully
managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing
processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Swales & Willis
Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

Half of all author proceeds for this book are donated to the June Givanni Pan-African
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Pan-African filmmaking in Europe, operating to promote Pan-African art and
philosophy to a wide audience, supporting Black artists in a colonial matrix that
otherwise marginalizes their perspectives and cultivating an appreciation for Black life
and art – all causes that were foundational to Sankara's radical Pan-African vision.

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Introduction

Amber Murrey

In late October 2014, protests broke out across Burkina Faso in response to a proposed constitutional amendment to extend presidential term limits. Hundreds of thousands of protestors took to the streets, asserting again that ‘trop, c’est trop!’ (‘enough is enough’) and demanding that Blaise Compaoré step down after 27 years as the country’s president. When tear gas, live ammunition and the declaration of martial law failed to suppress the protestors, Blaise announced his resignation. On 30 October 2014, protestors stormed the Parliament building in Ouagadougou (or as it is more commonly referred to, ‘Ouaga’). Popular social media websites, including Facebook and YouTube, were flooded with video clips and photos of some Burkinabè youth connecting this political victory to the heritage and legacy of their former president and revolutionary, Thomas Isidore Noël Sankara (1949–1987). It was a powerful moment for contemporary Pan-Africanism and youth-led political activism (Reza 2016).

Thomas Sankara was one of the most confident and vocal anti-imperialists of the late twentieth century. His life and political praxis continue to be significant in shaping and inspiring anti-imperial and Pan-African youth activism and resistance across the African continent and beyond. *A Certain Amount of Madness* draws together contemporary scholarship on Sankara’s life and political praxis with work on the contemporary resistance movements in Burkina Faso and elsewhere that draw inspiration from Sankara’s politics. While a growing body of important interdisciplinary and journalistic writing has emerged in the last half decade on Sankara’s life and assassination, there have been few serious considerations of his political praxis and relevance for contemporary revolutionary movements today. Part of the intention of this volume is to pay more serious attention to Sankara’s legacy (multifaceted, ambiguous and disputed) and afterlives together with reconsiderations of his innovative political praxis. The combining of these previously divergent projects allows for a more complete understanding of Sankara’s on-going

relevance at the same time that our examinations avoid hagiography or hero worship.

Considering Sankara's own proclamations against panegyric or excessively praising depictions – this was a man who refused to have photographs of himself displayed in public, denounced the popular songs praising himself and famously declared that 'there are 7 million Sankaras' – shows us that he would oppose overly celebratory depictions of himself. He would urge us to have a broader focus when we look at the politics of social justice in Burkina Faso, the 'land of the upright people'. He would demand that we prioritise integrity and people's material and cultural well-being and that we do so in a language legible to many.

The 23 chapters of the volume attest to Sankara's wide appeal: about half of the contributors are Anglophone or predominantly English-speaking and authors come from more than a dozen countries. Contributors are journalists, activists, students, development practitioners, academics and artists. Those authors who are academics are deeply interdisciplinary, representing nearly every discipline in the social sciences and humanities, including political science, political economy, human geography, development studies, sociology, anthropology, communications, comparative literature, history, art history, African studies and philosophy. This unique grouping of contributors makes for a diverse, unapologetically non-uniform and sometimes eclectic conversation on Sankara's politics, philosophies and legacies.

A number of historical and biographical chapters consider Sankara's rise to power in the late-Cold War context, including his leadership style, encounters with labour unions and assassination. Several of the chapters in the volume are critical of aspects of Sankara's political leadership and other chapters emphasise a holistic landscape of activism and resistance in modern day Burkina Faso (referred to here as 'Burkina' or 'le Faso'). Sizeable demonstrations occurred in 1999, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2011 as diverse groups from across civil society came together, including youth activists protesting against the unjustly arrested, detained, assassinated or disappeared (see Chapters 17 and 23, this volume; also Harsch 1999; Chouli 2012a, 2012b, 2014). In Chapter 3, British political economist and novelist Leo Zeilig considers the sizeable tasks of the revolution and the ways in which these posed considerable (and ultimately 'deadly') challenges for Sankara's government: to at once cultivate change and empowerment at the grassroots while also initiating large-scale and top-down development projects. Drawing from the research of French activist and writer Lila Chouli in Burkina Faso, Zeilig argues that the National Council of the Revolution (CNR)'s 'authoritarian approach had alienated sections of the Burkinabè population, leaving Sankara and his allies isolated'. In Chapter 4, British labour scholar Craig Phelan documents the tensions between Sankara's government and labour unions

in Burkina, arguing that Sankara ‘underestimated’ the influence of such unions.

Chapters from American historian Brian Peterson and French activist and biographer of Thomas Sankara Bruno Jaffré detail some of this isolation and alienation (Chapters 2 and 6, respectively). Peterson explains, ‘it was the Cold War, a zero-sum game, and there were repercussions to every alliance’. Sankara’s early relationships with Libya, North Korea, Cuba and Nicaragua, alongside his brazen diplomatic style and refusal to display deference to former colonial powers, meant that he was identified early on as a threat to global capitalist powers. Nigerian scholar Sakue-C. Yimovie (Chapter 12) writes on some of this threat in the form of Sankara’s conviction that the countries of Africa unite and refuse to pay odious debt, and his identification of debt as ‘a cleverly managed re-conquest of Africa ... [in which] each of us becomes the financial slave, which is to say a true slave’ (from Sankara’s speech at the Summit of the Organisation of African Unity in Addis Ababa, 1987).

Sankara’s vocal refusal to model the Burkinabè revolution after those of other nations distanced him from potential allies, among them the USSR and Libya, with both communist powers ultimately allegedly playing roles in incapacitating his leadership (see Chapter 2, this volume). The USSR by backing oppositional communist labour unions and Libya by allegedly arming and training the Liberian mercenaries who would collaborate in Sankara’s assassination (see Chapters 2 and 6, this volume). The inadvertent collusion of neoliberal capitalists and anti-capitalist communists in Sankara’s death is one of the great tragedies and ironies of the late Cold War in Africa. That Sankara’s assassination gave rise to 27 years of presidency by a neoliberal autocrat with close ties to colonial and imperialist powers makes his elimination all the more devastating (as is argued by Nicholas A. Jackson in Chapter 7 of this volume).

While chapters critical of Sankara are important, it is crucial to situate his brief presidency within the systematic decontextualisation and over-generalisation of leadership and politics across the African context, which has given rise to easy dismissals of African leaders like Sankara as merely autocratic, militaristic and/or populist. Jackson, for example, explains in Chapter 20 that the ‘central administrators of corporate political science shoehorned Sankara’s legacy into the conventional social science categories of anti-hegemonic resistance, populism and totalitarianism’. Indeed, as the editor of this volume, I often found myself cautioning authors against the pervasiveness (even unintentional) of the dismissive language of the academy in regards to African heads of state, wherein presidencies are labelled ‘regimes’ and decision-makers are dismissed as ‘authoritarian’, ‘putschists’ and ‘military men’ (see Chapters 1 and 5, this volume).

A number of chapters engage with aspects of Sankara’s philosophies and praxis, including his particular form of humanist Marxism, affinities and

dissimilarities with other Pan-African philosophers and leaders (Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem, Kwame Nkrumah, Walter Rodney and Jerry Rawlings among them) and commitments to gender equality. The chapters authored by American journalist and biographer of Sankara Ernest Harsch and Nigerian scholars of Africana studies and political science Felix Kumah-Abiwu and Olusoji Alani Odeyemi look at Sankara's praxis and its ruptures with Marxist socialism (Chapters 9 and 13, respectively). These examinations offer re-readings of Sankara. The political and economic context in which the Burkinabè revolution emerged required that Sankara develop a nuanced political praxis capable of implementing practical actions to address the combined forces of neo-colonialism, patriarchy, environmental degradation, food justice and more. While Sankara was inspired by strands of Marxist thought, the challenge of reconfiguring the relationship between the people and the Burkinabè state required a nuanced political praxis that necessarily departed from key aspects of Marxism, including, for example, the belief that socialism would arise from worker coalitions in societies characterised by advanced capitalism or that social revolution necessitated the elimination of private property. Setting often-divergent readings of Sankara's praxis and politics side-by-side allows the collection to avoid placing Pan-African political figures – from Sankara to the contemporary activists organising under the Sankarist mantle – into pre-conceived political categories.

Chapters from African feminists Patricia McFadden (Chapter 11) and Namakula E. Mayanja (Chapter 14) emphasise the ways in which gender justice was integral – rather than auxiliary – to Sankara's understanding of revolutionary emancipation. McFadden characterises this aspect of Sankara's revolutionary imperative as the most radical rupture it offered, writing 'Sankara posed an epistemological and foundationally ontological challenge to all black men. The challenge was to politically re-define the meaning and practice of heterosexual gendered identities. He went even further in his use of the notion of "authenticity", arguing that becoming non-patriarchal is the *necessary process by which men will 'become human'* (Chapter 11, this volume; emphasis added). Perhaps more than any other aspect of his radical political philosophy, his unequivocal call for gender justice has gone without contemporary parallel. Again asserting the importance of Sankara's insistence on the emancipation of women for African politics today, Mayanja argues that the neoliberal articulations of gender equality offered through international organizations have failed to address the structural and socio-historical foundations of patriarchy. She argues that Sankara recognised that 'women's emancipation is ... the essential ... feature for reconstructing Africa's statehood in a way that ensures social and ecological well-being, yet it remains a missing link' (Chapter 14, this volume).

Independent scholar and activist Ama Biney argues in Chapter 8 that

Sankara's political philosophy was an early and powerful form of decolonial thought, asserting black radical thought and praxis as an important point of heritage in what has been described as a predominantly Latin American counter-epistemology. Meanwhile, in Chapter 18, Haitian-American scholar Patrick Delices similarly positions Sankara within movements for decolonisation, most specifically his solidarity with the Saharawi people and the Polisario Front in Western Sahara. Drawing on decolonial scholar Sandew Hira's 'decolonising the mind' framework, Delices evaluates Sankara's multifaceted and internationalist struggle against imperialism in the region. Sankara's solidarity with Western Sahara was 'a powerful socio-cultural, anti-colonial symbol', but according to Delices, Sankara's solidarity lacked economic or material substance given the constraints of Burkina's economy.

One of the book's strengths is the volume of insightful chapters written by African and Black feminists and Pan-Africanists. Ghanaian historians De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway and Moussa Traore (Chapter 1) look at Sankara's Pan-Africanism alongside nuanced considerations of the role of militarism and culture in African revolutionary movements. Jamaican-British feminist political geographer Patricia Daley (Chapter 10) considers the politics of premature death and assassination of African leaders like Sankara and Abdul-Raheem in the context of pervasive neoliberalism.

Sankara's recognisable intellect, humour and charm have attracted a generation of African youth – the so-called 'conscious generation' that arose out of the 'lost generation' of the 1980s, that generation that suffered price hikes, austerity and joblessness under neoliberal policies. Prominent among these social movements has been Balai Citoyen (or Citizen's Broom), a Burkinabè organisation that emerged powerfully against Blaise Compaoré in October 2014. Burkinabè sociologist Zakaria Soré explains in Chapter 15 that, drawing from a Sankarist orientation, the group 'animates youth through a bottom-up Africanist discourse' including 'the values of integrity, honesty, social justice and accountability in public governance'.

In Part IV of the book, Dutch development practitioner and scholar Fiona Dragstra (Chapter 23), French art historian Sophie Bodénès Cohen (Chapter 21) and Ghanaian-American scholar-activist and development practitioner Celestina Agyekum (Chapter 22) look at the internationalisation of Sankarism through the political lives of activists and (in the case of Agyekum) Peace Corps volunteers who draw upon the Sankara mantle in diverse socio-political landscapes. The focus here is on the ways in which contemporary activists, artists and intellectuals find inspiration (or not) in Sankara's work and praxis. This approach ensures that the volume moves away from a limited focus on the individual – which Sankarist politics would reject – towards a critical framework that brings the 'new Sankaras' (or the 'children of Sankara') into view: the youth who are organising today, often despite great obstacles.

Agyekum's chapter is also an occasion to revisit Sankara's critiques of international development as fostering dependency and perpetuating misunderstandings. In an interview with Jean-Philippe Rapp in 1985, Sankara described aid volunteers from Europe:

They... are very sincere, but their ignorance about Africa leads them to make mistakes, blunders, that are sometimes insignificant, but that become decisive as time goes on. So after several years they go home completely disgusted with Africa. Yet it's not for lack of noble purpose. It's just that they came here with a patronizing attitude.

(Sankara 1985a: 191)

Sankara would suspend the Peace Corps (PC) programme in 1987. He was not alone in his suspicions of the PC, with Kwame Nkrumah expressing initial reservations with neo-colonial practices within American foreign policy prior to the launching of the PC in Ghana in 1961 (Amin 1999).¹

By foregrounding contemporary Pan-African collectives and philosophies, the book disrupts the scholarly treatment of Pan-Africanism as a 'historical' movement not only for demonstrating its importance for Sankara during the 1980s (during a period of relative 'hibernation' for Pan-Africanism²) but also for social movements today. Jamaican American Pan-Africanist, Horace G. Campbell (2017: 64–65), describes the contemporary global Pan-African movement as having 'grown in the past 25 years and in the process [it has] registered new milestones. One of the most important of these interventions has been the reassertion that *Black Lives Matter* and charting new directions for the repair of the planet earth ... This revolution is unfolding at an exponential pace'. Sankara has been an important figure for this new struggle, particularly on the African continent, as South African author and political commentator Levi Kabwato and South African researcher Sarah Chiumbu demonstrate in their chapter here. Kabwato and Chiumbu argue that the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements for the decolonisation of universities and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) 'draw inspiration from an awareness of international movements and renowned Pan-African figures, including Thomas Sankara' (Chapter 19, this volume).

German political scientist Bettina Engels furthers this task in Chapter 17 by examining oral histories of contemporary worker and labour movement protestors who distinguish their mission from Sankara's politics and offer alternative interpretations for social movement organising in modern day Burkina. Situating these chapters alongside other, more celebratory readings of Sankara's legacy for social movement actors and activists is an important part of this book's refusal to over-inflate Sankara's role and significance in Burkina's complex landscape of resistance and emancipatory projects. While certainly important and central for many Burkinabè and African youth, Sankara's

legacy is neither static nor flat – his legacy is as ambiguous and contested as the revolutionary project. Alongside this is the ethnographic work of scholar of African development and politics T. D. Harper-Shipman (Chapter 16), whose dialogues with Burkinabè development stakeholders working predominantly in the health sector in 2015 revealed, for example, the on-going importance of Sankara’s vision of development ownership, even in a sector that has been thoroughly neoliberalised since his assassination.

Other chapters consider the visual, literary and artistic homages to Sankara following his assassination. Sankara himself was a musician and guitarist. His enthusiastic support for the arts is a rare aspect of his presidency not erased by Compaoré. In Chapter 21, Sophie Bodènès Cohen gives thoughtful consideration to the visual iconography of Sankara, while also critically evaluating the risks and dangers of hagiography among artists and activists. What happens, Cohen demands that we ask, when a revolutionary leader is reduced to a face on a T-shirt? Is there power in the symbol that reflects the substance of Sankara’s life and philosophies? These chapters, including the final contribution from American independent researcher Nicholas A. Jackson, look at the disappearing of Sankara from radical scholarship and consider Sankara’s place in contemporary efforts to decolonise knowledge.

A Certain Amount of Madness moves from the cult of the individual towards a holistic approach to Sankara’s praxis by centring upon collective and participatory actions for self-emancipation that draw inspiration and guidance from Sankara’s political praxis and thought. Even with the wide-ranging focus of the chapters in this book, much remains to be written and said about Thomas Sankara, whose politics and praxis were ‘rich with a thousand nuances’ (Sankara 1985b: 238). The chapters here open up more questions to be addressed and more studies to be done, including the rich potentiality of further work on Sankara’s philosophy of race and racism (see Chapter 11, this volume) and more excavation of the archives on the political context and agents of Sankara’s assassination including up-to-date work on the on-going prosecution of those responsible for his death (see Chapter 6, this volume, as well as Aziz Salmone Fall’s Afterword). Just as this book goes to press, French President Emmanuel Macron vowed to students at the University of Ouagadougou that he would make public the French archives on Sankara’s assassination. While we welcome this development, Bruno Jaffrè reminds us that while this would be ‘an important breakthrough ... it would be insufficient ... [as] even when official papers are made public in France, there are still many remaining obstacles on the path to establishing the truth’. In responding to this announcement with poise and calm, Sankara’s widow, Mariam Sankara commented, ‘This is a good thing. Now, let us wait and see. Because we have wanted this for a long time ... [perhaps] we will finally see where the responsibility of France lies’ (2017).

THOMAS SANKARA

Sankara's childhood and young adulthood were marked with experiences of injustices and poverty on a personal level. From Sankara's interviews and speeches, we know that these early experiences marked him deeply. Indeed, Sankara had a keen ability to connect key moments in his childhood with his later political orientation.

Born in December 1949, in the town of Yako in the north of Burkina Faso, Sankara attended primary school in Gaoua. His family lived in the 'normalised rural poverty' of people in the villages and towns of the Sahel (Benamrane 2016: 17). An attentive mother worked diligently to instil in her children a strong moral and ethical code, with modesty and humility high on her list. She urged of her children that each one of them should be proud of themselves and should make efforts to be the best at what they do so that they are among the best of their chosen trade (Pondi 2016). Jean-Pierre Pondi attributes some of Sankara's attention to women's rights to his strong and early relationship with and respect for his mother and older sister, Marie Denise. Marie Denise contracted meningitis as a young child and never fully recovered. To Sankara's great annoyance, his father beat and ridiculed Marie Denise, attributing her disability to 'stubbornness'. In response, by the age eleven, Sankara would refuse to engage with his father for periods of time (Pondi 2016). In Chapter 11 of this volume, Patricia McFadden wonders, 'What was it about his resistance consciousness, his experiences of anti-colonialism and his desire for freedom that created the shift in his perceptions of women's freedoms as crucial to a different African future?' It is possible that the foundations of Sankara's attention to gender justice originated in these early encounters.

He later went to school at Lycée Ouezzin Coulibaly in Bobo-Dioulasso, the second largest city in Burkina Faso. He recalled arriving alone in the new city and being informed that, on the first day, classes were postponed and that the boarding house was also closed until the following morning. He walked the streets with his suitcase on his head ('I was too small to carry it any other way', he remembered), until he came to a bourgeoisie home and a kind man took him in for the night. Sankara never forgot the man's name, Pierre Barry, and was able to meet with him as an adult and thank him again for his kindness. Sankara's penchant for thanking and recognising kindness was one of his lasting attributes (see Jaffré 2007; Pondi 2016).

Thomas and his close childhood friend Fidèle enjoyed watching films. Among those noted as Sankara's preferred were the comedy skits of British actor Charlie Chaplin and the 1960 Italian/French co-production *Morgan, the Pirate* (in French, *Capitaine Morgan*). The latter is a fictionalised and romanticised account of the life of Henry Morgan, a Welsh profiteer and lieutenant governor of colonised Jamaica. Jean-Emmanuel Pondi explains that the film so impacted

Sankara during the Christmas vacation of his fourteenth year that he became known by his friends, premonitiously, as ‘Captain’.

When Sankara presented himself with an interest in perusing medicine – at the time, he wanted to be a surgeon – for junior high school (brevet d’études du premier cycle), he was overlooked in favour of children with influential family connections, although many of them had lower class standing than Sankara. This was an early lesson in the significance of family connections and wealth rather than intellect or merit (Pondi 2016). During this period of frustration, Sankara heard a radio announcement for a scholarship at a military high school, Prytanée Militaire du Kadiogo (PMK) at the military base Kamboincè near Ouaga.⁴ Founded by the French Army in 1951, the school was recruiting students. Sankara was accepted, although he was unable to convince Fidèle to apply. Sankara, who always enjoyed rigorous intellectual and physical activities, entered a new environment – one that would have a considerable impact on the trajectory of his life. Had his family been able to pay the fees for a superior school, Sankara would most likely have never pursued a military education, might never have travelled to Madagascar, Morocco and France, might not have participated in politics in a similar fashion.

After PMK, Sankara was selected as one of a few handfuls of students to be sent to officer training at l’Académie Militaire d’Antsirabé in Madagascar in 1966. Although his radical politics have often been attributed to his officer training, Sankara’s politics were also influenced by the exposure to a culture and place that revealed to him the poverty of Ouagadougou and of Burkina Faso (at the time still The Republic of Upper Volta). Pondi imagines that Sankara might have characterised Ouagadougou as a ‘dusty and unworthy village’ when compared to the capital city of Madagascar, Antananarivo. In Antsirabé, Sankara is recalled as having prevented conflicts between other trainees while studying military strategy, sustainable agriculture and agro-ecology, writing and editing as well as the guitar (Jaffré 2007). All the while he continued to reflect on the failures of the first decade of African independence (Pondi 2016). After obtaining his diploma as a superior officer at Antsirabé, Sankara remained in Madagascar for another year. During this year, he studied economy with a Malian Professor, Sidibé, and – ever pursuing physical labour and self-sufficiency – planted a field of rice (Pondi 2016). During his studies, he read the work of René Dumont, Amilcar Cabral, Samora Machel and Kwame Nkrumah – each of which seem to have influenced his approach to ecology, Pan-Africanism, humanism and politics in unique ways.

Sankara went on to complete professional training in Pau, France (with the parachutists) and Rabat, Morocco. In Morocco, he became close with Blaise Compaoré, who would be his second in command throughout his presidency (for more on this relationship, see Chapter 6, this volume). In the years before his presidency, Sankara fought in the border war against Mali (although

he disagreed with it), was appointed and resigned as secretary of state and, as prime minister, invited Muammar Qaddafi to visit Burkina Faso without authorization from the president, Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo (for a detailed historical account of his rise to power, see Chapter 2, this volume). Following his arrest in May 1983, massive street demonstrations occurred in Ouagadougou to demand his release, after which Sankara was placed under house arrest. In response, Blaise Compaoré and 250 military personnel organised a coup d'état on 4 August 1983 that delivered Sankara to power (see Chapters 2 and 6, this volume). He was president of the country for four years and two months before he was assassinated on 15 October 1987 alongside five of his special cabinet members, Paulin Bamouni, Bonaventure Compaoré, Frédéric Kiemdé, Christophe Saba and Patrice Zagré as well as seven soldiers. Blaise Compaoré assumed power with the support of Jean-Baptiste Lingani and Henri Zongo.

‘A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF MADNESS’: NONCONFORMITY
AND ANTI-IMPERIAL POLITICS

One of the central aims of this book is to look more seriously at aspects of Sankara’s political thought and praxis, strands of which are referred to in these chapters as Sankarism, Sankarist(e) thought or burkindlum. It is important to note that Sankara himself was critical of self-aggrandisement and self-promotion and would have been critical of such titles; he never gave a formal name to his philosophical orientation nor published political treatises. Indeed, he was even reticent to reveal his own reading preferences, saying ‘I never make notes in a book or underline passages. Because that’s where you reveal the most about yourself’ (Sankara 1986: 263). Sankara’s was a political praxis that was, contributors here argue, distinctive from other forms of Marxism and Pan-Africanism. In terms of revolutionary movements in Africa, Sankara’s stands out not only because it occurred well after independence, but also because of the ambition of its vision: Sankara was an economic revolutionary who aimed to achieve social justice at home while recalibrating Burkina Faso’s place in the international system. Also, unlike many of the African leaders of his generation and those preceding him, Sankara did not author books that captured or guided his political philosophy in any systematic way our task is to trace Sankara’s words and actions to synthesise his radical and comprehensive approach to social transformation, self-sufficiency and freedom.

The title of the book, *A Certain Amount of Madness*, draws from Sankara’s interview with Jean-Philippe Rapp in 1985, when he said:

I would like to leave behind me the conviction that if we maintain a certain amount of caution and organization we deserve victory ... You cannot carry out

fundamental change without *a certain amount of madness*. In this case, it comes from nonconformity, the courage to turn your back on the old formulas, the courage to invent the future. It took the madmen of yesterday for us to be able to act with extreme clarity today. I want to be one of those madmen. ... We must dare to invent the future.

(Sankara 1985a: 141–144; emphasis added)

Although Sankara attributes some of his political philosophies and praxis to an awareness that fundamental change would be *perceived as madness* ('les audaces les plus folles'), the chapters in this collection reveal that much of this apparent madness was part of Sankara coming into power with a commitment to the people of le Faso alongside an understanding of the operations of oppression, imperialism and a colonial global political economy. Sankara understood the immensities and dangers of the revolutionary project before him; he knew that he would be perceived as a 'madman' for fighting against a powerful global economic elite.

Sankara spoke often of radical black leaders who were being assassinated all around him (Maurice Bishop among them). Although he was only 33 years old when he became president, he referred to his wife as 'la veuve' (the widow), a darkly humorous title that nonetheless revealed his awareness of the likelihood of his premature death as well as his absence of fear in regards to it. Sankara's bravery – his 'madness' – would again be echoed in the popular movement of 30 and 31 October 2014, when student protestors would embody some of this 'mad' courage and draw courage from the proverb, 'cabri mort n'a plus peur du couteau' ('a dead kid [i.e. baby goat] is no longer afraid of the knife'), meaning that someone with little to lose also has little to fear. This expression of 'madness' embodied the courage to stand up to the Compaoré government, which had for so long 'instrumentalised a feeling of fear to govern' (Ouédraogo 2015: 4).

For Sankara, politics was praxis. He prioritised the politicisation of non-elites and non-specialists in a determination to *do, make* and *effect* social change (as opposed to writing about it). As he reminded the audience during one speech, 'What is left for us to do is [to] *make* the revolution!' Revolution, for Sankara, was more than a 'passing revolt' or a 'simple brushfire'. Rather, the political economy of le Faso needed to be 'replaced forever with the revolution, the permanent struggle against all forms of domination' (Sankara 1984a). His praxis was deeply populist and oriented to the grassroots. Sankara's political philosophy shows an undaunted attention to praxis over philosophising, saying that 'singers, dances, and musicians' can equally stand with formal representatives of the revolutionary party to 'explain ... what the revolution should be' (Sankara 1984b: 149). He was a modest but demanding 'organic intellectual' with a preference for easily understandable language.

Nonconformity and brazen courage were central to Sankara's innovative praxis (see Chapter 9, this volume). Sankara combined this awareness with strands of humanist Marxism, an unabashed, pro-women Pan-African populist nationalism, nuanced ecological and gender awareness and a notorious commitment to self-less, humble living that stands as an exceptional illustration of leadership-by-example. Sankara was ambitious, driven and often uncompromising. His presidency offers a glimpse into what it looks like when a militant activist becomes the leader of a country. Sankara's speeches and activities were more like those of radical social justice activists than with heads of state. Sankara maintained his captain's salary of US\$450 during his four years and two months as president. He wore cloth spun from Burkina Faso cotton, the *faso dan fani*, and encouraged or demanded that other members of the government to do the same.

Even as president, he would share rations with his troops, as his chauffeur, Sidibé Alassane, recalled in an interview in 2017.⁵ Some displays of this sort of radically humble and down-to-earth living were not well received by all government officials. After one particular meeting, Sankara announced to his ministers that they would go and eat lunch together at a nearby restaurant. The group applauded in apparent pleasure, until he named the restaurant: Yidigri, a restaurant serving mostly low-income clientele near the Yalgado Hospital. After lunch, Sankara announced that each minister would pay their own bills, along with the bills of their chauffeurs. The event was intended to be a lesson in collectivism, unpretentiousness and generosity – all pillars of Sankara's political praxis (Pondi 2016) – but not everyone welcomed nor appreciated these public effacements of social privilege. Some journalists and academics have suggested that at least some of his modest lifestyle was a ruse while others have characterised him as 'manipulative' in working to appeal to a popular base. What none of these examinations provide, however, is any indication of what ulterior motive would have prompted Sankara to orchestrate such a persona. This is particularly so considering that he actively worked against his own self-enrichment both in and out of the public eye.

Arguments that Sankara's humble lifestyle was adopted merely for public audiences do not hold up to more thorough considerations of his politics, all aspects of which reflect a radical way of living. His wife, Miriam Sankara, recalls for example that Sankara would sleep on the terrace during warm nights because he did not want to run the air conditioning when others were sleeping without it (Miriam Sankara in the preface to Pondi 2016). At the time of his death, Sankara owned little and was quite possibly one of the poorest heads of state in the world. Among his possessions at the time of his death: four bicycles, a car, three guitars and a refrigerator. Take, on the other hand, Blaise who has an estimated net worth of US\$275 million.

Sankara understood his role as that of critical space-maker: he sought to create the socio-economic and political conditions for well-being, integrity and