

## Contents

<i>Preface</i> by Mary-Alice Waters	9
<i>Introduction</i> by Michel Prairie	19
<i>Maps</i>	26
<i>Burkina Faso at the time of the revolution</i>	29
<i>List of initials and acronyms</i>	30
<i>Chronology</i>	33

### SPEECHES AND INTERVIEWS

<b>Who are the enemies of the people?</b> <i>At mass rally in Ouagadougou (March 26, 1983)</i>	51
<b>A radiant future for our country</b> <i>Proclamation of August 4 (August 4, 1983)</i>	65
<b>Power must be the business of a conscious people</b> <i>Press conference (August 21, 1983)</i>	69
<b>Building a new society, rid of social injustice and imperialist domination</b> <i>Political Orientation Speech (October 2, 1983)</i>	76
<b>The People's Revolutionary Courts</b> <i>Speech to inaugural session (January 3, 1984)</i>	110
<b>There is only one color—that of African unity</b> <i>On return from Africa tour (August 1984)</i>	120
<b>Our struggle draws strength from Cuba's example and support</b> <i>Receiving Order of José Martí (September 25, 1984)</i>	137

<b>Asserting our identity, asserting our culture</b>	
<i>At Burkinabè art exhibit in Harlem (October 2, 1984)</i>	143
<b>Our White House is in Black Harlem</b>	
<i>At rally in Harlem (October 3, 1984)</i>	147
<b>Freedom must be conquered</b>	
<i>At United Nations General Assembly (October 4, 1984)</i>	154
<b>We must fight imperialism together</b>	
<i>Interview with 'Intercontinental Press' (March 17, 1985)</i>	176
<b>Dare to invent the future</b>	
<i>Interview with Jean-Philippe Rapp (1985)</i>	189
<b>There are attempts to unleash an unjust war against us</b>	
<i>Speech at mass rally in Ouagadougou (September 11, 1985)</i>	233
<b>On Africa</b>	
<i>Interview with Mongo Beti (November 3, 1985)</i>	239
<b>The Malian troops are no longer prisoners, they are our brothers</b>	
<i>At Burkina-Mali solidarity rally (January 3, 1986)</i>	250
<b>Imperialism is the arsonist of our forests and savannas</b>	
<i>At International Conference on Trees and Forests, Paris (February 5, 1986)</i>	254
<b>On books and reading</b>	
<i>Interview with 'Jeune Afrique' (February 1986)</i>	261
<b>French enables us to communicate with other peoples in struggle</b>	
<i>Message to First Francophone Summit (February 17, 1986)</i>	266
<b>The CDRs' job is to raise consciousness, act, produce</b>	
<i>At First National Conference of CDRs (April 4, 1986)</i>	270
<b>At Nicaragua's side</b>	
<i>Remarks greeting Daniel Ortega (August 27, 1986)</i>	297

<b>What is the Nonaligned Movement doing?</b>	
<i>At Nonaligned Summit, Harare (September 3, 1986)</i>	303
<b>A death that must enlighten and strengthen us</b>	
<i>Speech on death of Samora Machel (October 1986)</i>	313
<b>We must make Nicaragua's struggle known throughout the world</b>	
<i>At mass rally in Managua (November 8, 1986)</i>	321
<b>Against those who exploit and oppress us— here and in France</b>	
<i>At official reception for François Mitterrand (November 17, 1986)</i>	325
<b>The revolution cannot triumph without the emancipation of women</b>	
<i>On International Women's Day (March 8, 1987)</i>	335
<b>A united front against the debt</b>	
<i>At Organization of African Unity conference, Addis Ababa (July 29, 1987)</i>	373
<b>We can count on Cuba</b>	
<i>Interview with Radio Havana (August 1987)</i>	382
<b>Our revolution needs a people who are convinced, not conquered</b>	
<i>On fourth anniversary of revolution (August 4, 1987)</i>	387
<b>Eight million Burkinabè, eight million revolutionaries</b>	
<i>On fourth anniversary of Political Orientation Speech (October 2, 1987)</i>	403
<b>You cannot kill ideas</b>	
<i>A tribute to Che Guevara (October 8, 1987)</i>	420
<i>Glossary</i>	425
<i>Index</i>	437

## *Preface*

This preface is taken from remarks by Mary-Alice Waters, president of Pathfinder Press, to a February 10, 2005, presentation in Havana, Cuba, of the Spanish-language edition of *We Are Heirs of the World's Revolutions* by Thomas Sankara, a booklet published in French in 2001 and in English the following year containing five of the thirty speeches and interviews that are in this new edition of *Thomas Sankara Speaks*. The event was organized as part of the annual Havana International Book Fair.

Also speaking on the panel were Manuel Agramonte, Cuba's ambassador to Burkina Faso during the four years of the revolutionary government led by Thomas Sankara; Armando Hart, one of the historic leaders of the Cuban Revolution and long-time minister of culture; and Ulises Estrada, director of *Tricontinental* magazine and himself an internationalist combatant with a long record of missions in Africa and Latin America.

This booklet by Thomas Sankara, the leader of Burkina Faso's popular revolutionary government from 1983 to 1987, was published by Pathfinder Press in French and then English some three years ago. The publication of *Somos herederos de las revoluciones del mundo* means that now, for the first time ever, a few of Sankara's most important speeches are also available in Spanish. It is a powerful new weapon in the hands of those fighting to advance along the road first charted in the Communist Manifesto more than 150 years ago by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels and their comrades.

In October 1984, adopting a practice employed so effective-

ly by Fidel [Castro] and Che [Guevara] before him, Thomas Sankara used the platform of the United Nations General Assembly to speak for and on behalf of the oppressed and exploited of the world. "I come here to bring you fraternal greetings from a country . . . whose seven million children, women, and men refuse to die from ignorance, hunger, and thirst any longer," Sankara told the assembled delegates of 159 nations.

"I make no claim to lay out any doctrines here. I am neither a messiah nor a prophet. I possess no truths. My only aspiration is . . . to speak on behalf of my people . . . to speak on behalf of the 'great disinherited people of the world,' those who belong to the world so ironically christened the Third World. And to state, though I may not succeed in making them understood, the reasons for our revolt."

Sankara voiced the determination and dignity of the people of one of the poorest countries of imperialist-ravaged Africa—one that then had the highest infant mortality rate in the world, a rural illiteracy rate approaching 98 percent, and an average life expectancy of some forty years. He reached out to, and spoke on behalf of, all those the world over who refuse to accept the economic bondage of class society and its consequences, including ecological devastation, social disintegration, racism, and the wars of conquest and plunder inevitably wrought by the workings of capitalism itself. Sankara knew such conditions are not "natural" phenomena, but the products of today's imperialist world order.

That world order, Sankara explained, can be fought, and must be destroyed. What marked him above all was his confidence in the revolutionary capacities of ordinary human beings to accomplish this. Like Fidel and Che, Sankara *believed* in the men and women so arrogantly dismissed by the rulers of the imperialist world. Sankara, as Fidel so memorably said of Che, did not think that man is "an incorrigible little animal, capable of advancing only if you feed him grass

or tempt him with a carrot or whip him with a stick." Sankara, like Che, knew that anyone who thinks like that "will never be a revolutionary, . . . never be a socialist, . . . never be a communist."<sup>1</sup>

Sankara believed that a world built on different economic and social foundations can be created not by "technocrats," "financial wizards," or "politicians," but by the masses of workers and peasants whose labor, joined with the riches of nature, is the source of all wealth. By ordinary human beings who transform themselves as they become an active, conscious force, transforming their conditions of life. And the revolutionary government he headed set out along this course, mobilizing peasants, workers, craftsmen, women, youth, the elderly, to carry out a literacy campaign, an immunization drive, to sink wells, plant trees, build housing, and begin to eliminate the oppressive class relations on the land.



Sankara stood out among the leaders of the struggles for national liberation in Africa in the last half of the twentieth century because he was a communist. Unlike so many others, he did not reject Marxism as a set of "European ideas," alien to the class struggle in Africa. He understood that Marxism is precisely *not* "a set of ideas," but the generalization of the lessons of the struggles of the working class on the road to its emancipation the world over, enriched by every battle. And he drew from those lessons to the best of his abilities.

Speaking before the United Nations in 1984, he linked the freedom struggle of the people of Burkina Faso to the centuries of revolutionary struggle from the birth of capitalism

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1. Fidel Castro, October 8, 1987. Published as "Che's Ideas Are Absolutely Relevant Today," in Ernesto Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, *Socialism and Man in Cuba* (New York: Pathfinder, 1989).

to today—from the American and French revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century to the great October Revolution of 1917 that “transformed the world, brought victory to the proletariat, shook the foundations of capitalism, and made possible the Paris Commune’s dreams of justice.” We are the heirs of those revolutions, he said—hence the title of this small book.

We are “open to all the winds of the will of the peoples of the world and their revolutions, having also learned from some of the terrible failures that led to tragic violations of human rights,” he noted. “We wish to retain only the core of purity from each revolution. This prevents us from becoming subservient to the realities of others.”

And along that line of march, Sankara looked to Cuba as the preeminent example of revolutionary struggle in our times.



Sankara was not only a leader of the people of Africa. He was not only a spokesman for the oppressed and exploited of the semicolonial countries. He gave leadership to working people in the imperialist world as well. In the last decades of the twentieth century, proletarian leaders with the world stature of Thomas Sankara, Maurice Bishop of Grenada, and in a similar way Malcolm X in the United States, have emerged from the ranks of the oppressed peoples of all lands—even the most economically undeveloped—to give leadership to the international struggle for national liberation and socialism. And thus to take their rightful place in history.

That fact is a measure of the vast changes that have marked the past century—the strengthening of revolutionary forces worldwide foreseen by [V.I.] Lenin and the leaders of the Communist International in the first years after the victory of the October Revolution.

This is the tradition in which we can today place the example given us by our five Cuban brothers who continue to

fight not as victims, but as combatants of the Cuban Revolution placed by circumstances beyond their will on the front lines of the class struggle in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Within the federal prisons, where they are serving the draconian sentences the U.S. rulers imposed on them, they are carrying out their political work among some two million others who are the recipients of what Washington calls justice. That is where we see the original of the face that the whole world has witnessed so clearly at Guantánamo Bay Naval Base and in Iraq.<sup>3</sup>



The books produced by Pathfinder are not sold only in bookstores or through the worldwide web. Most are sold on the streets—from sidewalk tables in working-class districts of the cities and towns of the United States and Europe, at mine portals and factory gates, on university campuses and

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2. The Cuban Five—Fernando González, René González, Antonio Guerrero, Gerardo Hernández, and Ramón Labañino—were convicted in 2001 of charges including conspiracy “to act as an unregistered foreign agent,” “to commit espionage,” and “to commit murder.” Sentences were handed down ranging from fifteen years, to terms of double life plus fifteen years. The five—each of whom has been named “Hero of the Republic of Cuba”—had accepted assignments to infiltrate counterrevolutionary groups in the United States and keep the Cuban government informed about terrorist attacks being planned against the Cuban people. Millions worldwide have mobilized to condemn the convictions, sentences, and harsh conditions of detainment and to demand their release.

3. Since early 2002, the U.S. government has used its Guantánamo naval base in eastern Cuba—a piece of Cuba’s territory held by Washington against the will of the Cuban people—for a prison housing hundreds seized primarily in Afghanistan as part of imperialism’s “war on terror.” Deemed “enemy combatants,” these prisoners have not been charged with any crimes and have been subjected to brutality and torture, denied contact with their families, and prevented from challenging their detention in any court of law.



at high school doors, at demonstrations or meetings where those who are fighting and seeking a way forward for working people are likely to gather.

At those tables, the face of Thomas Sankara has a powerful, indeed unique impact. Many passing by are literally stopped in their tracks when their eye falls on the book *Thomas Sankara Speaks*—a substantial selection of his speeches that Pathfinder published in English very soon after he was assassinated in 1987. Some do not know who Sankara is. But they are attracted to the confidence, character, and integrity they see in his face, and want to know more about him.

It is among the growing tens of thousands of immigrant workers from West and Central Africa who today are swelling the ranks of the working class in the imperialist centers, driven there by the whiplash of capital, that Sankara is best known and respected. Many are astonished to see the face of Sankara on a street table in the neighborhood where they live or work, on the cover of a book of his speeches, edited, printed, and distributed in the United States by working people there who look to Sankara as a revolutionary leader. That fact alone leads a good number to begin to think about the working class in the United States in a different way, and to be open to seeing the importance of the traditions of struggle they bring into what is the growing resistance by working people in North America to the bosses' assaults on our wages, job conditions, hours of work, and basic social and political rights.

And it is important to add that the converse is equally true. Reading Sankara is for us an important part of broadening the historical and cultural horizons of those who have been born or lived for years in the imperialist centers.



Since it first appeared in 1988, close to 7,000 copies of *Thomas Sankara Speaks* have been sold in English alone,

and many thousands more of the first French edition, *Oser inventer l'avenir*—dare to invent the future.

From the very beginning, one of the hallmarks of the revolutionary course Sankara fought for was the mobilization of women to fight for their emancipation. As he says in one of the speeches published here, an October 1983 talk that presents the program of the government he headed, "The revolution and women's liberation go together. We do not talk of women's emancipation as an act of charity or out of a surge of human compassion. It is a basic necessity for the revolution to triumph. Women hold up the other half of the sky."

Sankara's powerful speech to a gathering of several thousand women on International Women's Day, March 8, 1987—also contained in *Thomas Sankara Speaks*—has been published by Pathfinder as a pamphlet, *Women's Liberation and the African Freedom Struggle* that is available in four languages—French, English, Spanish, and Farsi. Some 12,000 copies of that title have been sold since it first appeared in English translation almost fifteen years ago—more than 1,500 in Farsi in Iran alone.

We are proud that with the publication of this selection of some of the most representative of Sankara's other speeches, his voice will now be heard more broadly in Spanish. *Somos herederos de las revoluciones del mundo* includes, for example, his powerful speech on imperialism's destruction of the trees and forests of Africa, given to an international conference in Paris in 1986.

Before top dignitaries of the French imperialist government, Sankara affirmed:

The battle against the encroachment of the desert is a battle to establish a balance between man, nature, and society. As such, it is a political battle above all, and not an act of fate. . . .

As Karl Marx said, those who live in a palace do not think about the same things, nor in the same way, as those who live in a hut. This struggle to defend the trees and forests is above all a struggle against imperialism. Imperialism is the arsonist setting fire to our forests and our savannas.

That speech by Sankara is cited extensively in the recently produced issue number 13 of *New International* magazine, which is also being presented here today. From its lead article, entitled "Our Politics Start with the World," by Jack Barnes, to the photo of Earth at Night on its back cover—a photo that captures the economic and cultural inequalities, the veritable abyss, that exists between the imperialist and semicolonial countries, and among classes within almost every country—this issue of the magazine of Marxist politics and theory distributed by Pathfinder deals in depth with many of the same political issues and the course of action Sankara fought to advance.



To end, I want to point to the depth of Sankara's internationalism so evident in these pages. For him, the popular, democratic, revolutionary struggle of the people of Burkina Faso was one with the struggles to bring down the apartheid regime of South Africa; it was one with the anti-imperialist struggles of the people of Angola, Namibia, Palestine, Western Sahara, and Nicaragua; it was one with the people of Harlem who so warmly welcomed him there in 1984; it was one with the working people of France, the United States, and across the imperialist world.

It was in Managua in 1986 that I had the pleasure of meeting and coming to know Sankara as a leader. We were both delegates to an international conference marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Sandinista

National Liberation Front (FSLN) and the tenth anniversary of the fall in combat of founding FSLN leader Carlos Fonseca. Sankara was chosen to speak at the rally on behalf of the 180 international delegations present there.

When he learned that a delegation from the Socialist Workers Party in the United States was present, he made a point of heading straight to our table to greet us. It was not just as an act of diplomacy; he came to talk politics with fellow revolutionists. He knew that the *Militant* newsweekly was one of the few papers outside Africa that regularly wrote about the revolutionary course unfolding in Burkina Faso, carrying interviews and speeches by Sankara whenever we could get them.



The presentation of *Somos herederos de las revoluciones del mundo* here in Cuba is especially appropriate because of the final selection it contains, Sankara's tribute to Che on October 8, 1987. That twentieth anniversary of Che's fall in combat was barely a week before the counterrevolutionary coup d'état that ended Sankara's own life.

It is only because of a fortunate combination of circumstances that Sankara's words at that memorable event are available to us today. The exhibition focusing on Che's revolutionary course and example, inaugurated that day by Sankara, coincided with the opening of an international antiapartheid conference in Ouagadougou attended by delegations from some twenty-nine countries. Among them were compañeros from the United States and Canada, supporters of the *Militant* newspaper, and of Pathfinder Press. They were looking at the displays when Sankara arrived together with Che's son Camilo and a number of other Cuban compañeros. When Sankara began his impromptu remarks, one of the Canadian compañeras pulled out a tape recorder she had in her backpack and recorded them. The *Militant*

transcribed and published them shortly afterward, and they are included here in their totality.

Che taught us “we could dare to have confidence in ourselves and our abilities,” Sankara pointed out on that occasion. Che instilled in us the conviction that “struggle is our only recourse.”

Che, Sankara insisted, was “a citizen of the free world—the free world that we’re building together. That’s why we say that Che Guevara is also African and Burkinabè.”

What more appropriate place to end?

*Mary-Alice Waters*

## *Introduction*

On August 4, 1983, a popular uprising in the West African nation then known as Upper Volta initiated one of the most profound revolutions in Africa's history. A former colony of France, Upper Volta, with more than seven million inhabitants, was among the world's poorest countries. The central leader of the revolution was Thomas Sankara, who became president of the new government at the age of thirty-three. A year later the people of Upper Volta adopted the name Burkina Faso—the Land of Upright Men.

Thomas Sankara was born in December 1949 in Yako in the center of the country. His father was an assistant policeman, at that time one of the country's few inhabitants to work for the colonial administration. His family moved to Gaoua near the border with Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) in the country's southwest, where Sankara attended elementary school and was among the tiny handful of African youth fortunate enough to gain a high school education in Bobo-Dioulasso. He then entered the Kadiogo military school in Kamboinsé—one of the few avenues for young people of his generation in sub-Saharan Africa to receive a higher education.

While Sankara was continuing his training in Madagascar, tens of thousands of workers and students organized mass demonstrations and strikes in 1972 that toppled the government. The scope and character of the popular mobilization had a deep impact on him. It was also in Madagascar that Sankara first became acquainted with Marxism, through

study groups and discussions with students from France who had been part of the May 1968 prerevolutionary upsurge there. During a subsequent stay in France in the late 1970s, taking training as a paratrooper, Sankara scoured bookstores for revolutionary literature, studying, among other things, works by communist leaders Karl Marx and V.I. Lenin.

A lieutenant in Upper Volta's army, Sankara came to prominence as a military leader during a border conflict with Mali in December 1974 and January 1975, a war he later denounced as "useless and unjust." Over the next several years, he linked up with other junior officers and soldiers dissatisfied with the oppressive conditions in Upper Volta perpetuated by the imperialist rulers in Paris and elsewhere, with the support of landlords, businessmen, tribal chieftains, and politicians at home.

Jailed briefly in 1982 after resigning a government post to protest the regime's repressive policies, Sankara was appointed prime minister in January 1983 in the wake of a coup that made Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo the president of the country. Sankara used that platform to urge the people of Upper Volta and elsewhere in Africa to advance their interests against the propertied exploiters at home and abroad. This uncompromising course led to growing conflict with proimperialist forces in the government. In May Ouédraogo had Sankara and some of his supporters arrested. But, in face of street protests by thousands, Ouédraogo transferred Sankara from prison to house arrest. In the following months, social tensions deepened across the country, heading toward a political showdown.

On August 4, 1983, some 250 soldiers led by Captain Blaise Compaoré marched from an insurgent military base in Pô to the capital of Ouagadougou. The regime of Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo was overthrown in a popular uprising. Sankara became president of the new National Council of the Revolution. Over the next four years the popular rev-

olutionary government under Sankara's leadership organized the peasants, workers, and young people to carry out deep-going economic and social measures that curtailed the rights and prerogatives of the region's landed aristocracy and wealthy merchants. They joined with working people the world over to oppose imperialist domination. Mass organizations of peasants, craftsmen, workers, youth, women, and elders were initiated.

With broad popular support, the government abolished tribute payments and compulsory labor services to village chiefs. It nationalized the land to guarantee rural toilers—some 90 percent of the population—access to the fruits of their labors as productive farmers. The prices peasants received from the government for basic food crops were increased. The government launched tree-planting and irrigation projects to increase productivity and stop the advance of the desert in the Sahel region in the north of the country. It organized massive immunization campaigns, and made basic health care services available to millions. By 1985 infant mortality had fallen from 208 for every 1,000 live births at the beginning of the decade to 145, and the accelerated spread of parasite-induced river blindness had been curbed. In a country where illiteracy was 92 percent—and even higher in the countryside—literacy campaigns in its indigenous languages were initiated. Steps were taken to combat the age-old subjugation of women, who were encouraged to organize to fight for their emancipation. The government funded public works to build roads, schools, and housing. Trusting in the justice of the working class and peasantry, it set up popular revolutionary courts to try former leaders and high officials accused of corruption.

Led by Sankara, the Burkinabè Revolution charted a course of internationalist solidarity with those fighting oppression and exploitation in Africa and worldwide. Sankara championed the fight of the people of Western Sahara against the occupation of their country by Morocco and helped lead a



successful fight to admit the Saharawi representatives to the Organization of African Unity. He actively organized support, in Africa and beyond, for the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa and for the Palestinians' fight to reestablish their homeland. Sankara campaigned for cancellation of the onerous debt imposed on semicolonial countries by imperialist governments and banks. He spoke in New York City's Harlem to demonstrate support for African-Americans' fight against racist oppression and for other struggles by working people in the United States. He extended Burkina's hand to rising revolutionary struggles in Central America and the Caribbean, visiting Cuba in 1984 and 1986, and Nicaragua in 1986, where he spoke on behalf of all the international guests at a 200,000-strong rally marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Sandinista National Liberation Front.

In August 1987, speaking in Burkina Faso on the anniversary of the revolutionary uprising four years earlier, Sankara emphasized that, "The democratic and popular revolution needs a convinced people, not a conquered people—a convinced people, not a submissive people passively enduring their fate." Growing numbers of workers, peasants, and youth issuing from the ranks of such a people were becoming involved in social and political life in Burkina Faso, setting an example that was already reverberating throughout Central West Africa—far beyond the borders of that landlocked country. On October 15, 1987, Capt. Blaise Compaoré led a military coup serving the interests of those—at home and abroad—whose property and class domination were threatened by this deep-going revolutionary mobilization. Sankara and twelve of his aides and bodyguards were assassinated and the revolutionary government destroyed.

A week before his death, at a special commemoration in the capital of Ouagadougou, Sankara had spoken about Ernesto Che Guevara, the Argentine-born leader of the Cuban

Revolution who died in combat twenty years earlier during an internationalist mission in Bolivia. In a speech reproduced in this book, Sankara, speaking of Che's legacy, noted that revolutionaries as individuals can be killed but "you cannot kill ideas." Thomas Sankara has himself become a symbol for millions of workers, peasants, and youth throughout Africa especially, who recognize in the Burkinabè Revolution—and in its continuing political heritage—a source of political ideas and inspiration for the battles for genuine liberation on the continent.



The present collection of speeches and interviews is a new edition, entirely revised and expanded, of two earlier books. The first, *Thomas Sankara Speaks*, was rapidly published in English by Pathfinder in the months following the assassination of Sankara. The second, *Oser inventer l'avenir* [Dare to invent the future], was copublished in French in 1991 with l'Harmattan in Paris. This new edition, published in French and English with identical title and contents, appears on the twentieth anniversary of the coup in which Sankara was murdered. Its presentation will coincide with events in several countries celebrating the political accomplishments and living legacy of the revolutionary government he led.

Particular attention has been paid to placing the Burkinabè Revolution in its historical and international context. A new preface—along with a new introduction, maps, photo pages, explanatory notes, and index—will help readers unfamiliar with events, places, and people mentioned in the book to find their way. The chronology and glossary have been updated and expanded in the same spirit.

This edition includes five new documents:

- Substantial extracts of a previously unpublished interview conducted by writer Mongo Beti from Cameroon.
- The message sent by Sankara to the First Francophone

Summit in Paris, February 1986.

- The remarks Sankara made at an official reception in Ouagadougou for French president François Mitterrand, November 17, 1986.

- A speech on the foreign debt given during a conference of the Organization of African Unity in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in July 1987.

- And the last major speech given by Sankara, October 2, 1987, on the fourth anniversary of the Political Orientation Speech, the programmatic document of the Burkinabè Revolution.

The French version of these documents has been revised to eliminate errors and misprints in the first edition. The translation to English has been carefully checked to ensure accuracy. Both have been reset in larger, easier-to-read type.



This new edition of *Thomas Sankara Speaks* could not have seen the light of day without the help and encouragement of numerous people.

First and foremost, our thanks go to Mariam Sankara, wife of Thomas Sankara, and to Paul Sankara, his brother. Both of them were generous in helping to clarify a number of questions about Thomas Sankara's words as well as various events of the revolution.

Our thanks also go to Germaine Pitroïpa, high commissioner of Kouritenga province during the revolution. In addition to lending us a number of her personal photos, she patiently answered numerous questions directed her way as we prepared footnotes, revised the English translation of the text, and prepared the maps.

Jean-Louis Salfati in Paris devoted many hours to finding photographs and researching the glossary, chronology, and footnotes.

A number of people around the world gave generous as-

sistance in assembling the photos and maps illustrating this new edition. Special mention goes to Augusta Conchiglia of the magazine *Afrique Asie*, Thuy Tien Ho of the agency Orchidées, and Didier Yara in Paris; to photographer Dany Be of Madagascar; to Balozi R. Harvey in New Jersey; to Elombe Brath, Kwame Brathwaite, and Rosemari Mealy in New York; and to Étienne Côté-Palluck and Richard Lavoie in Montreal.

Production of this book in two languages was made possible by the work of more than 200 volunteers in the Pathfinder Print Project who offered their time and skills to review the documents and their translation, set and proof-read the type, prepare the many digital files for printing, and, finally, to help get out the finished product, making possible its distribution in bookstores, on street corners, at factory gates—wherever the workers, farmers, and youth to whom these books are dedicated can be found. It is they who will respond to Thomas Sankara's call, "dare to invent the future."

*Michel Prairie*

JULY 2007