

Thomas Sankara

Revolution is a perpetual teacher

Speech at Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, 4 August 1987

(fourth anniversary of the revolution)

Translated by Samantha Anderson



Thomas Sankara, 1949-1987

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Honourable guests from the Soviet Union, Togo, Benin, Niger, Ivory Coast, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, Angola, Ethiopia, the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic, Libya, Algeria, Iran, Cuba, France, Italy;

Dear friends of Burkina Faso who have come from Senegal, Belgium, and Spain;

Comrades of the democratic and popular revolution:

Today, August 4, 1987, we are celebrating the fourth anniversary of our revolution, the August revolution, the democratic and popular revolution. In order to reach this joyful and exhilarating gathering, we let our hearts guide our way, and our hearts led us to Bobo Dioulasso, this historic and exuberant town whose name is so totally linked to the Africa of the anticolonial struggle, the Africa of unity, of federation, in short, the Africa of invigorating pan-Africanism.

I wish to thank all who came here today: all those who have become Burkinabè for the day and those who are Burkinabè forever. I wish to thank all those who could not make the trip to Bobo Dioulasso, but who are certainly with us in spirit – with us humbly and unobtrusively by choice or by necessity, with solemnity and dignity.

Thanks also to all those who were unable to celebrate with us today, due to illness and other various hardships, and who stoically cherish the hope of better days. And to those who are no longer with us, but who had every right to savour the pleasure of our victories – in the memory of all those militants who have prematurely left us, let us observe a minute's silence.

Thank you.

Comrades, the fourth anniversary of our revolution takes place under the banner of our dynamic peasantry, the community of those who solve in practice the concrete question of food every day and for every one of us. Yes, it is this peasantry, emerging from the shadows of the Middle Ages and backwardness, that one way or

another must win this gamble every year under the most precarious conditions. This peasantry, our peasantry, makes up the largest part of our population. It is this part that has been subjected to – and continues to be subjected to – the most intense exploitation at the hands of the remnants of the feudal-type forces and of imperialism. It is this part that has suffered the most from the ills we have inherited from colonial society: illiteracy, obscurantism, pauperization, various forms of harassment, endemic diseases, famine, and so on.

So it comes as no surprise that our peasantry today is a force that wants change, revolutionary change, because only the revolution, by overturning the old order, can satisfy its legitimate aspirations. In order to respond to this legitimate desire and mobilize all available energy, the democratic and popular revolution has transformed this peasantry into an organized political force by creating the National Union of Peasants of Burkina.

The political force must have as its axis the strengthening of the revolutionary process by forging a conscious commitment to the revolution on the part of each and every poor peasant. In the course of the past year many fine initiatives have been taken in this direction. But the task is a big and complex one, and we will undoubtedly be required to come back and define our goals more fully and profoundly during this fifth year of our revolution.

The fourth anniversary celebration, focused on the peasantry, should mark the birth of a new kind of peasant in harmony with the new society that is being built. We are not celebrating the backward peasant, who is resigned to his fate, naïve, a slave to obscurantism, and ferociously conservative. We are celebrating the birth of the new peasant, who is serious and aware of his responsibilities, a man who is working for the future by arming himself with new technology. The more an more widespread application of the slogan “Produce and consume Burkinabè” is already helping to create this new image of the peasant, the great actor in and beneficiary of our policy of building an independent national economy, as laid out by the Second National Conference of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution.

In addition, implementing the first five-year plan of public development, which is part of this new economic policy, should be the occasion for all of us to learn how to meet our own needs and constantly improve the quality of our work. The plan should thus not be carried out with the sole concern of making it possible some day to compile statistics.

Thanks to this all-embracing transformation and its consequences, the term peasant should cease to be the derogatory term we know today and become a synonym for respect – the respect we owe to a proud and worthy combatant who defends just

causes and who successfully and adequately shoulders his part in social production as a member of this great body that is the people. The peasantry should not be left to fight this battle alone. The working class and the revolutionary petty-bourgeois intellectuals should take up their historic responsibility and, through sacrifices and self-denial, work to reduce the gap between town and country. The working class and the revolutionary petty-bourgeois intellectuals should thus consider this celebration as an important milestone in the process of strengthening their strategic alliance with the peasantry. Today is the festival of the peasantry and therefore of its allies too – allies symbolized by our emblem, the emblem of the democratic and popular revolution.

Comrades, today we must take a look at the four years our revolution has existed, not to mechanically laud our success – though a legitimate pride urges us to do so – but to better draw the lessons and clarify the road to further progress. We have undertaken and completed many concrete transformations that have benefited the masses. These results have not come because our equipment is more plentiful or exceptional in quality. They are due to the actions of men – men who yesterday were resigned to fate, mute, and passive. Today these same men are on their feet and engaged in a concrete revolutionary struggle in different workplaces. The victories we are registering are the fruits of their labour, the projection in real life of their creative genius and their revolutionary enthusiasm. These results are proof that our revolution is a genuine people's revolution, because it draws on the strength, the richness, and the invincibility of the masses.

This is why we should salute so much courage, self-sacrifice, and devotion on the part of the rank and file of the democratic and popular revolution. We do not salute them out of self-satisfaction. The results we have achieved can be explained scientifically. Power, whether it comes from muscles or is produced by machines, can be measured and compared and therefore is interchangeable. Others before us have demonstrated this – we had only to apply it to our reality. Doing so has required that our mentality here in Burkina cease to be a mere reproduction of the cultural alienation and political servitude shaped by imperialism to perpetuate its domination of our newly independent countries.

The transformation of our mentality is far from complete. There are still many among us who take foreign norms as their point of reference in judging the quality of their social, economic and cultural lives. They live in Burkina Faso yet refuse to accept the concrete reality of our country.

For the new society, we must have a new people, a people that has its own identity, knows what it wants and how to assert itself, and understands what will be necessary to reach the goals it has set for itself. Our people, after four years of

revolution, are the embryo of this new people. The unprecedented decline of passive resignation among our people is a tangible sign of this. The Burkinabè people as a whole believe that a better future is possible. On this level, we have even managed to convince reactionaries of yesterday – people who today, caught up in the gears of history's forward march, join us in looking to the future with optimism, forgetting that only yesterday they were preaching submission to imperialism and perpetual begging as a way to develop the country.

The construction of our homeland has strengthened our collective consciousness of the need to depend on our own forces and to energetically reject all servile mimicking and humiliating and degenerate grovelling.

Comrades, the political year that has just ended, culminating in this fourth anniversary, has certainly been full of action. While not going back over the details of the contradictions that have appeared, or on the quality of the solutions we have found, we must assimilate the main lesson of this experience. The democratic and popular revolution needs a convinced people, not a conquered people – a people that is truly convinced, not submissive and passively enduring its destiny.

Since August 4, 1983, revolutionary Burkina Faso has burst onto the African and international scene especially and above all due to the intellectual genius and moral and human virtue of its leaders and of its organized masses. We have overcome adversity and triumphed over determined and vile opponents who were armed to the teeth. We have known how to be firm in the defense of our principles without ever giving in to rage. We have defended ourselves without hatred and with respect for the dignity of others, because dignity is sacred in Burkina.

What we need to do here above all is to note the diverse forms hostile forces can take and – since tomorrow's battles will undoubtedly be harder and more complex – draw the lessons that will make us stronger. During the past four years of the revolution we have had to constantly confront reaction and imperialism. They have hatched the most sordid plots aimed at sabotaging our work – or worse, overthrowing our revolution. Imperialism and reaction are and will remain fiercely opposed to the transformations that are taking place every day in our country and that threaten their interests.

Throughout four years of revolution our people have been proving that it is possible to eliminate exploitation, to do away with misery, and to create happiness for all with the power of our own hands and hearts. Those living in luxury from the exploitation of others have been opposed to our struggle and will be ever more so tomorrow. What have they not done, what are they not prepared to do even today, to stop our forward march? Economic sabotage, smear campaigns, corruption,

provocations of all sorts, blackmail, and threats – these are the kinds of enemy manoeuvres we have had to identify and confront during these four years of revolutionary struggle.

We have also seen adversity within our beloved Burkina, within our own ranks, in the camp of the revolution. Erroneous practices and ideas harmful to the revolution have, in fact, developed within the masses and among revolutionaries. We have had to combat these problems despite the relative fragility of our own ranks. We have seen appalling about-faces; confrontations have followed provocations, and we have even seen splits, though nothing is ever permanent.

We have come up against opportunism and watched it at work. It works in various ways to get us to desert the revolutionary struggle and abandon an intransigent defense of the people's interests in the frantic search for personal and selfish advantage. The systematic defense of our revolutionary orientation has led us to combat any idea or conduct that blocks the deepening of the revolution.

For having chosen to follow this path rather than the easier road of demagogy, we have been subjected to ever more slanderous attacks from both our traditional enemies and from elements who have come out of the ranks of the revolution. These elements are either impatient or smitten with the unfortunate zeal of the novice, or else they are frantically and openly pursuing personal ambitions.

Opportunism, just like the counterrevolution, is a thornbush habitually found in the path of the revolution. Until the revolution reaches its final objective – the creation of a new society where exploitation of man by man has ceased – opportunism will continue to show itself at different moments, under different circumstances, and in extremely varied forms, all the way from its most right-wing expressions to its most ultra-left and radical. The difficulties of the struggle, the demands of political activity, the harshness of the class struggle – all these factors have contributed to some comrades deserting our ranks pure and simple or rushing out ahead of the masses or else simply targeting the wrong enemy.

Others dream of throwing in the towel but have qualms about how they should do it. They also theorize in advance their desertion from the revolutionary struggle. This is why so many theories and ideas, all thoroughly imbued with opportunism, have been – and still are – circulating.

All of this has given rise to hostile elements we have had to combat in order to go forward. Yet we continue to believe that it is only other revolution that have been and are suffering setbacks and defeats, cooptation by the bourgeoisie, fatal deadlocks, and betrayals.

Our revolution, just like others, is constantly threatened by counterrevolutionary dangers. WE must be conscious of this, highly conscious in fact, and firmly commit ourselves to the permanent defense of a correct line that will take us toward our final goal. Above all, we must be conscious that these problems grow up dialectically, from the sharpening of the class struggle. If there were no such problems, it would signify in reality that the revolutionary struggle was being deceitfully quelled in favour of class collaboration.

Comrades, we must take the time today to draw the lessons of our past activity so that we can enrich the theory and practice of our revolution and deepen our commitment to the struggle in an organized, more scientific, and resolute manner.

The tasks that lie ahead of us are many and complex. The enemies of our people and revolution are working with redoubled energy and ingenuity to bar our road forward. We will need more courage, more conviction, and more determination to keep marching forward. This determination and conviction will come, in part, from the lessons we are able to draw from four years of struggle. This is why we must make our revolution's fifth year a year of critical appraisal of our work, a year of scientifically organized ideological and political work. Yes, we need such an appraisal.

During the four years of our revolution we have carried out many important revolutionary transformations and have laid the basis for solving a number of problems facing our people. We have been very active in many different sectors of our society. We have given the impression that we want to change everything, and immediately. There have been criticisms of us from time to time; we understand this well. Furthermore, we note that other important tasks have been neglected or downplayed. We must devote this fifth year of the evolution particularly to carrying out these tasks, which are of a political, ideological, and organized character.

The deepening of our revolution and the future success of our political activity will depend on how well we solve these problems of organization and political orientation in our country. The revolution cannot go forward and achieve its goals without a vanguard organization able to guide the people in all its battles and on all fronts. Forging such an organization will require a big commitment on our part from now on.

Based on the work we have already carried out in search of solutions to the organizational question, revolutionaries in Burkina must combine their efforts with the goal of overcoming the defects and inadequacies we all share. Unity among revolutionaries is undoubtedly a stage we must go through in advancing the

organization of the vanguard. I am pleased to note that on this fourth anniversary of our revolution the basis has been laid for building real unity, a militant unity of all the revolutionary forces in our country.

We should, however, guard against a barren, monolithic, paralysing, and sterile kind of unity. We would rather see the enriching, varied, and manifold expression of many different thoughts and diverse activities. We need thoughts and activities that are rich with a thousand nuances, all put forward courageously and sincerely in the framework of accepting differences and respecting the need for criticism and self-criticism, and all directed toward a single, bright goal, which can be none other than the happiness of our people.

Comrades, the ideological, political and organizational tasks we must accomplish are of great importance for strengthening our revolution and for sustaining the massive and conscious support of our people for the revolutionary policies we will continue to follow. It will take persistent and rigorous political and ideological work to convince the masses and tear them away from all kinds of backward conceptions that hamper their full commitment to the building of a new society. While the revolution equals repression of the exploiters and our enemies, it can only signify persuasion for the masses – persuasion to take on a conscious and determined commitment to the struggle.

Carrying out the ideological and political work of our revolution is the duty of all revolutionaries, above all of the political leadership. This leadership must strengthen itself and become more effective and demanding of itself in carrying out its mission. This fifth year of the revolution calls on us to throw all our energies into this fight to organize, into this effort to consolidate ourselves politically and ideologically, into putting the question of political leadership first.

In terms of structured political organization, however, what we are saying here excludes our precipitously throwing ourselves into theoretical schemes and concoctions that are stimulating for the mind but of no practical interest for the daily lives of the masses. Let's learn from the experience of other revolutions in history. In particular, let's take into account the experience of those like us – and there are many – who have had to equip themselves with diverse but unified organizations, or a single, diverse organization, at the same time as they organized and defended the state power so worthily conquered through bitter struggle. So let's avoid producing theoretical flow charts from abstract schemas that have no purpose in real life and are of no interest to the masses. This kind of politics is only good for the mediation of a handful of dreamers, or for political fanatics who need self-gratification.

Our revolution is the opposite of this. It is first and foremost a revolution of quality. Its goal is the qualitative transformation of our minds, which will translate itself in practice into building a new Burkinabè society. It is the quality of life that is changing in Burkina, and that is the result of a qualitative evolution of our minds.

The dream of getting rich through a dog-eat-dog struggle, based on what happened in the capitalist jungle of the post-war years, has disappeared forever from Burkina. Our homeland has become a vast construction site where the criteria of morality, concern for social justice, and respect for everyone's fundamental right to live and to enjoy an increasingly better and better life are not just empty words but take material form in the social activity of every one of us.

This is what gives our revolution its specific character, makes it an example, and accounts for its spreading influence. This is what we have defended ferociously until now. And for this we must remain revolutionary, that is, men of flesh and blood, men of feelings and of pure emotions.

It is a fact that occasionally we have made errors in the recent past. This should never happen again on the sacred soil of Faso. All of us must have room in our hearts for those who are not yet in perfect agreement with the Political Orientation Speech and the goals of our five-year plan. It is our job to go to them and win them to the revolutionary cause of the people.

The revolutionary does not look for short cuts and yet requires that we all march together, united in thought and in deed. This is why the revolutionary must be a perpetual teacher, a perpetual question mark. And if the masses do not yet understand, it is our fault. We must take the time to explain and convince them so that we can act with them and in their interests. If the masses do not understand correctly, it is still our fault. We have to correct errors, be more precise, and adapt ourselves to the masses and not try to adapt the masses to our own desires and dreams. Revolutionaries are not afraid of their own mistakes. They have the political courage to admit them publicly, because doing so means committing oneself to correcting them and doing better. We should prefer one step forward with the masses to ten steps without them.

We still have much work to do to broaden out the ranks of committed cadres, male and female. We still have thousands of comrades to mobilize for revolutionary work. This work is above all work to consolidate and deepen the indisputable acquisitions of our revolution.

After four years, we must increase tenfold the attention we pay to critically appraising what has been accomplished. We should reject all triumphal and

superficial balance sheets, which are so dangerous over time. Perseverance, tolerance, criticism of others, criticism of ourselves – this is the difficult fight to wage, the revolutionary fight. As revolutionaries we have chosen the difficult road, which means we must go beyond ourselves, surpassing ourselves individually and collectively. There are easier and quicker ways, but these only produce illusions and bitter tomorrows. We will be able to succeed thanks to our revolutionary structures in the workplaces, in the towns, and villages, thanks to our Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, the National Movement of Pioneers, the National Union of Elders of Burkina. These structures need to be perfected and completed. Those whose construction is most in need of our daily effort will be the focus of our attention throughout this fifth year of the revolution.

Comrades, dear friends from countries in Africa, Europe, America, and Asia, in the name of our people and the National Council of the Revolution, I would like to reiterate our thanks for the support you bring to our struggle and to repeat our sincere desire to maintain friendly relations with the peoples of all your countries. Burkina Faso, land of peace and dignity, will always be present where fraternity and militant, active solidarity are being defended.

Comrades from Houet Province, through your enthusiastic work and your mobilisation you have made this fourth anniversary of our revolution an important stepping-stone in the long road of our people's struggle for a bright future. I congratulate you and encourage you to redouble your vigilance and fighting vigour so as to register ever more spectacular successes.

Comrades of the democratic and popular revolution, our revolution is not sadness and bitterness but rather the enthusiasm and pride of an entire people that is taking charge of its destiny and is thereby discovering its own dignity. This is why I invite you to the festival, a festival that is the logical conclusion of work so well-done and that marks the beginning of new and demanding battles so full of promise.

Comrades, I invite you to commit yourselves to the work of our revolution's fifth year, to stand collectively on your feet in order to pursue this march we have begun at an even more accelerated pace, but at the same time knowing how to pause – to pause in the pursuit of a certain number of projects, a necessary pause if we are to devote sufficient energies to our organizational, political, and ideological tasks.

I invite you to step forward, to step into the new year that is beginning – a year of struggles, but a year that will allow us to more firmly anchor our revolution and put ourselves at the disposal of the peoples of the world as a contribution to humanity's

quest for happiness, effused to them by their enemies, but that we, the peoples gathered here, have a duty to build today, now, and for everyone.

For unity with Ghana! [*Shouts of "Forward!"*]

For a conscious, organized, and mobilized peasantry! [*Shouts of "Forward"*]

For strengthening the National Union of Peasants of Burkina! [*Shouts of "Forward!"*]

For reducing the gap between town and country! [*Shouts of "Forward!"*]

Produce! [*Shouts of Burkinabè!"*]

Consume! [*Shouts of Burkinabè!"*]

Live with the masses!

Triumph with the masses!

Homeland or death, we will triumph!

Course: African Revolutionary Writing

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