

# There Is Only One Color — That of African Unity

August 1984

*The following excerpts are from a news conference given by Sankara in August 1984 following celebrations marking the first anniversary of the revolution. Sankara had recently visited Ethiopia, Angola, the Congo, Mozambique, Gabon, and Madagascar. The excerpts are translated from Carrefour africain, August 10, 1984.*

*Question:* What is the state of relations with your conservative, relatively more wealthy neighbor, the Ivory Coast?

*Thomas Sankara:* In what sense is the Ivory Coast conservative? I understood your question, but I'd like to know more precisely which aspect of its ideology makes it conservative in order to better judge the difference, if there is one, between our ideology and theirs.

Our relations are good, in that the Ivory Coast had relations with Upper Volta, and Burkina Faso<sup>1</sup> has stated clearly — as I said in my [first anniversary] message — that we would be open to relations with all nations and we would seek out all nations. In this spirit, I believe we have good relations with the Ivory Coast. Of course, there is always something that can be done to improve them. But we are in no way uncomfortable with the current situation. If our brothers in the Ivory Coast wish, we can continue this way and do even better. So I am not aware of any particular difficulties between the Ivory Coast and Burkina.

Of course, we have opponents in the Ivory Coast — many of them. But as revolutionaries we understand that whereas we became revolutionaries, the world we have to live with is not revolutionary, and we live with a reality that is not always to our liking. We must be prepared to live with regimes that are not making a revolution of any kind or that perhaps even attack our revolution.

This is a very big responsibility for revolutionaries. Maybe those of tomorrow will function in a better world and will have a much

easier task. But for us, anyway, as soon as we accept that the Ivory Coast is not making a revolution and that we are, everything becomes simple. The difficulty, complications, and concerns are mainly in the minds of the romantic brand of revolutionaries who hope or think that everyone should act like revolutionaries. For us there are no surprises. We are quite at ease with the situation. It's a reality we had prepared ourselves for.

*Question:* There are historic ties between Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast. We can see that by the periodic visits you make as part of the different organizations in the region and the subregion. But concretely, Comrade President, since the National Council of the Revolution has come to power, what does the Abidjan-Ouagadougou axis look like? In addition, some talk of a certain coolness and point to the cancellation of your working visit to the Ivory Coast as proof. What is this all about?

*Sankara:* You ask what the Abidjan-Ouagadougou axis looks like! It looks like a straight line, serviced by Air Ivoire, Air Volta, soon to be Air Burkina; or a twisting, winding line, as shown by the Abidjan-Ouagadougou railway — a rather bumpy axis, very rough, with many ups and downs. The Abidjan-Ouaga route passes through dark regions, forests, and savannah that stretch from the ocean to the heart of the parched Sahel. Thus, it represents a combination of complex realities that each one of us must take into account. That's what the axis looks like, since you asked for a description.

On your second question. You say a coolness exists according to certain sources — you don't say according to whom, which doesn't facilitate my task — but that certain journals or people speak in one way or another of a certain coolness between Abidjan and Ouagadougou.

In Burkina we live in the warmth of the revolution, and those who are shivering can protect themselves as they wish and take the necessary precautions. The Ivory Coast and Burkina have all kinds of relations — geographic, historic, economic, social, and other. They are relations that cannot be made to disappear by sounding a gong. And the Ivory Coast cannot act as if they don't exist.

Today, Burkina Faso is embarked on a revolutionary road to transform its society, to fight against a certain number of ills and scourges that exist here, and we think that only Burkina's enemies are complaining. Every citizen of the Ivory Coast who loves the people of Burkina should applaud the revolution. Anyone who dislikes our rev-

olution does not love the Burkinabè people. This is where you must start in order to know where the cold is located and who is getting cold.

Does this mean that the Ivory Coast had excellent relations with reactionary Upper Volta and suddenly is getting cool because Upper Volta has become revolutionary? That's a question that can be answered only in the Ivory Coast. Burkina lives in the warmth of the revolution, warmth that we gladly share with anyone who is willing to accept it, but that we cannot impose on anyone. It would really be a shame if fraternal peoples, neighboring peoples, were not to share in or benefit from this same warmth.

*Question:* In contrast to the Ivory Coast, Ghana and its president are always welcome in Burkina Faso. We even saw troops [from Ghana] in the parade celebrating the revolution. Where does support end and interference begin? Or, in a word, could Ghana become a weight on your young country?

*Sankara:* Support to whom and interference in whose affairs? Interference begins when a people considers it has been betrayed. As long as this is not the case, the support can never be enough.

Ghana comes to Burkina Faso and demonstrates with us whenever it's called for, on happy and sometimes not so happy occasions. This is because — we have no doubts, and I'm sure you have no doubts either — the peoples of Ghana and Burkina Faso are kindred spirits. As long as this remains true, we can only deplore the fact that we have not done enough to increase the support.

We do not have a chauvinist view of things, and we condemn all sectarianism. This is why we consider borders to be merely administrative boundaries, necessary maybe, in order to limit each country's field of action and enable it to see things clearly enough. But the spirit of liberty and dignity, of counting on one's own resources, of independence, and of consistent anti-imperialist struggle — this spirit should blow from north to south and back again, crossing all borders with great gusto. We are happy to note that this is the case between Ghana and Burkina Faso and it should continue to be the case.

Do you think that our country would have any problems or difficulty at all, that our relations could not be improved with just about anybody, if this wind were to blow from our country to all others? Do you think that different countries would be threatening each other with the apocalypse today if this same wind were blowing among all the countries of the world? We could take the example of Iran and

Iraq today. Don't you think it would be good if Iranians could go and visit Iraqis as Ghanaians come to visit Burkina Faso and vice versa?

The example of Ghana and Burkina Faso is one that we would like to see multiplied many times over, and we think this would be in the interests of the different peoples. Those who feel endangered by this are perhaps those who would like to set Ghana against Burkina Faso for their own ulterior motives.

*Question:* What does Burkina Faso think of the current crisis within the Organization of African Unity (OAU)?

*Sankara:* We think that it's a completely normal crisis, one that is welcome, in fact, because it flows from a revolutionary process that necessitates reevaluating and redefining our aims.

The OAU could not continue to exist as it was. Unity-mongering has won out too easily over genuine concern for unity. Many things have been sacrificed in the name of unity and because of this unity-mongering. Today, the peoples of Africa are more and more demanding, and because of this they are saying no to meetings and conferences whose function is to adopt resolutions that are never acted on, or to prevent the adoption of resolutions that could be acted on and that people have been waiting for.

Africa is face to face with herself and her problems — problems the OAU had succeeded in skirting by putting them off to tomorrow. But this tomorrow is now today. We can no longer put all these questions off until tomorrow. This is why we find the OAU's crisis quite normal. It may even be a little late in coming.

*Question:* Could you tell us the position of Burkina Faso on the conflict in the Western Sahara?

*Sankara:* We have recognized the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). We think there can be no beating around the bush on this. When a people has chosen its organization, recognition is obligatory. In our opinion, there should be no OAU summit without the participation of the SADR. Should it be absent for some reason that is not legitimate, Burkina Faso will not lend itself to this game.

*Question:* You have spoken many times about wanting aid and cooperation, whether it be African or otherwise, but not just any kind of aid. What do you mean by this?

*Sankara:* Aid to Burkina Faso must serve to strengthen, not undermine, our sovereignty. It should help to destroy the need for further aid. All aid that puts further aid to death is welcome in Bur-

kina Faso. But all aid that creates a beggar mentality, we will have to do without. This is why we pay very close attention and impose extremely stringent conditions every time someone promises us aid, or when we take the initiative to ask for it.

You cannot make a revolution or gain your independence without a certain amount of stoicism and sacrifice. This is what the people of Burkina impose on ourselves — precisely so as not to give in to the temptation of taking the easy way out, as some aid we are offered would allow us to do. Luring us on in this way has done a lot of harm to our country and others. We want to put a stop to it.

*Question:* Comrade president, during your stay in Koupéla [Burkina Faso] you received a member of the International Court of Justice. You surely talked to him about the problems between Burkina Faso and Mali. How is this matter progressing and are you optimistic about the outcome?

*Sankara:* Forty-five days after we took power, Burkina Faso expressed to the people of Mali our utmost willingness to find a just solution to this problem. We lifted all vetos and did away with any prohibitions or obstacles that might prevent a frank and constructive discussion of this question.<sup>2</sup>

I should say that spontaneous gestures are generally the most sincere. We consider it very important to assure the people of Mali of our sincerity, our will, and our profound desire to live in peace with them. This is why this ball, which was in our court, has now been thrown into the other court, and there is nothing more for us to do on this matter now. We are looking to the other players, whether it be the International Court of Justice or Mali. We are leaving them the time to act or react and we're not too concerned about it.

*Question:* Your colleague from Zaire has recently demanded the setting up of a league of black African states. Were you consulted on this, and what do you think of this initiative by President Mobutu? Specifically, do you think that such an organization is the answer to the problems black Africa is facing? And do you think that the conflicts in the Western Sahara and Chad are the cause of the OAU's current difficulties?

*Sankara:* Your question disturbs me a great deal because you seem to be saying again that the heads of state have been consulted about this famous proposal for a league of black African states. This is what seems to be the case. At any rate I have, fortunately, not been consulted on this. Maybe only those who are thought to have some-

thing to contribute to such a proposal have been consulted.

We are not opposed to Africans who are black regrouping among themselves, given the fact that there are black and white Africans. But we don't really see what this would accomplish. We don't know what purpose it would serve to keep repeating that we are black, as if the problems of the OAU arise because it is two-colored, when we should be thinking of forming a one-colored organization. This is surrealism, a certain kind of art that doesn't move us particularly.

You — and *Jeune Afrique* — seem to talk about the “conflict in the Western Sahara,” while we talk about the conflict between the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic and Morocco. Let's understand each other. You seem to be saying that the SADR and Chad could be the reasons that the OAU is beginning to blow apart, a little as if these two questions, Chad and the SADR, were questions that involve nonblack Africans, and that by eradicating them from the OAU and making the OAU an all-black organization, we could regain our lost harmonious relations. I am not at all convinced that relations between the SADR, which is African and mostly white, and certain African countries that are black, are worse than relations between one particular black African state and another. So it's not a question of color. In terms of component organizations of the OAU, there is no place for the color-sensitive. There is only one color — that of African unity.

*Question:* What is your view of the evolution, that is, the failure, of the Brazzaville conference?<sup>3</sup>

*Sankara:* As you know, we were fully behind the Brazzaville effort. We said it should not become a boxing ring where you bring on the heavyweight champion. We gave all possible support to [Congolese] President Sassou Nguesso so that the conditions for dialogue that he has tried to establish could serve to allow the people of Chad to sort things out among themselves. We said that in order for the conference to be of any value, it would have to recognize the progress made by the people of Chad against their enemies.

*Question:* On your relations with Libya. Could you give an example of the kind of assistance Libya gives to Burkina Faso?

*Sankara:* There you are asking a very complicated and difficult question. There are so many examples I could give, we could spend hours and hours, days even, describing the assistance we receive from Libya. We have very good relations with Libya, which only deepen as each country more clearly affirms its own personality and

independence. We are very pleased, very satisfied with the way Libya respects our independence.

We visit Libya often. Not long ago, I met Colonel Qaddafi, and we discussed many questions and opened up a number of mutual criticisms. We are also prepared for self-criticism where we find these criticisms are well-founded and should prompt us to revise our positions. We invite Libya to do the same. Revolutionaries must be able to engage in criticism and self-criticism. This does not mean that Libya is perfect, because nothing is perfect in any country of the world. And this is what gives rise to our discussions. So our relations continue to be as they always have been, except for this new element of mutual criticism and fruitful debate.

*Question:* During your tour of Africa you visited Mozambique and Angola. As we know, these countries have signed pacts with South Africa that seem, at first sight, to be contrary to their nature. So how does Burkina Faso view these pacts?

*Sankara:* We have already explained our view on this. There is a question of principle involved here. Racist South Africa will never cease to be a poison, a thorn in Africa's side in general. As long as this thorn has not been removed, this barbarous, backward, anachronistic ideology — apartheid — racism will not be wiped out. So we are unequivocal. We will never change our position on this.

The concrete ways and means, the tactics, for resolving this problem are the business of each country. But the bottom line is that the battle against racism must be waged. We must avoid confusing tactics and strategy. This is why, while we avoid giving lessons to or criticizing our comrades from Mozambique and Angola, we remind them that they have a duty to combat racism. Whatever tactics they may choose, they must wage a permanent fight against this racism. Acting in any other way would be a negation of all the sacrifices made by our African martyrs and of everything that is being done today or was done yesterday.

At the same time, we do not neglect criticizing other African states for not giving concrete and effective support to those countries that have watched over the security of all of us against racism. It is because Mozambique dared to support other regimes that what used to be Rhodesia today lives a different reality. It is because Angola stands guard against South Africa that, from the north to the west of Africa, we escape the direct threat of racism. If these two countries should fall, if the organization of Frontline States should blow apart, we would face a direct, dangerous, and systematic invasion of our

boundaries by the racists.

So we can only invite these two countries to fight ferociously against racism, against racist South Africa. And, by the way, we can only wish them all the necessary vigilance. When you deal with the devil, you must take the precaution of having a spoon with a very long handle — long enough, at least.

*Question:* What does Burkina Faso think of the preconditions posed by South Africa for granting independence to Namibia, that is, the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola?

*Sankara:* The precondition South Africa poses is a red herring, because South Africa itself deals with all kinds of countries, including African countries, that have foreign troops on their soil. Why don't they pose the presence of these troops as a problem? Why do they want to keep foreign troops out of Angola, when it is Angola itself that asks for these troops and seems to find their presence and support useful? This is Angola's right. Angola has the sovereign right to call on Cuban troops, and it's to Cuba's credit that Cubans are prepared to go and die for another country when they, too, have danger at their door and on all sides.

In terms of the general question of the presence of foreign troops in this or that country, we think there are some countries that have the right to raise this question and some that have no right at all, especially when they themselves have foreign troops on their own soil. Cuban troops are no less legitimate than these other troops whose presence is aimed at prolonging those countries' domination.

*Question:* You made reference in your speech to countries that greet you with the kiss of Judas or that support the enemies of your people. Do you consider France to be in this category of countries, and how do you see relations between Burkina Faso and France?

*Sankara:* It is likely that, at the time, only Jesus spotted Judas — I'm not sure the other eleven disciples did. Let's not get ahead of ourselves and put anyone's intentions on trial. But you know that one Judas recognizes another and can often be caught red-handed plotting against us if he betrays himself by this or that deed.

Of course, in things like this, traitors can always deny everything. But their deepest intentions have a way of coming out in the end. The first of the twelve, Peter, when he was trying to dissociate himself from Jesus, who was being brought to public justice, was himself surprised, and was told "your accent betrayed you."

Well, you've read the Holy Scriptures as well as anyone, so I



won't go on. France has relations with us that may cause surprise, and we think they could be better. Our desire to improve them is certainly there, as we have said repeatedly. But for that to really happen, France will have to learn to deal with African countries — with us, at least — on a new basis, which it does not do, and for which the conditions are not always there. We deeply regret the fact that if [the Socialist Party electoral victory in] May 1981 brought about a transformation in France, you are the only ones who know it. France's relations with Africa, at any rate, have not changed at all.

The regime in France today is following practically the same course as the regimes that preceded it. They are also face to face with the same spokespeople for different African groups. The France of today is no different from the France of yesterday. This is why we who express and transmit a new African reality are not understood, and why we may ripple the tranquil pond of Franco-African relations a bit.

We arrive with a language of truth, a truth that is perhaps blunt and somewhat forthright, but that is accompanied by a sincerity not often found elsewhere. For too long France has been used to the kind of language used by — I wouldn't quite call them bootlickers, but — it is accustomed to hearing the language of local lackeys functioning under neocolonial conditions. It can't understand that there are some who have no desire to be among those ranks.

If people in France would take the time to understand the new reality we are living through in Burkina Faso, as a new reality that is largely shared in many other African countries, if they would take the trouble to accept the way things really are, many things could change. But, unfortunately, they prefer to see the case of Burkina as an accident of history, a fluke, perhaps a transitory phenomenon. No, reality has changed in Africa, and our relations with other countries must evolve to take this into account.

*Question:* You said that Burkina Faso is open to countries of all different political persuasions. In May 1981, the Socialists took power in France, and yet your country's ideology is still opposed to that of France. Could we say that the relationship between your two countries should be one of friendship that could be qualified as conditional? And if so, what would be the conditions?

*Sankara:* I think there is no such thing as friendship without conditions. Even sudden passion has its conditions, I believe, and when the novelty wears off the people concerned come down to earth and find reality surprisingly cold.

Friendship between Burkina and any other country is conditional on respect for our sovereignty and for our interests, just as we too have an obligation to respect our partners. Imposing conditions is not a one-way street. We think that any dialogue we have with France must be a frank one. Sincerity, provided that both partners are willing to strive for it, could make it possible to develop a program of friendship.

France's representative, its ambassador here, considers that since August 4, 1983, the scale of diplomatic exchanges between France and then Upper Volta has tipped very much to our detriment. This has many consequences. France continues to believe that the positions of Burkina Faso can be guessed at or interpreted through this or that *prima donna*. This means that France has not grasped the fact that Burkina Faso is a new animal, which, however, reflects a new reality in Africa.

*Question:* Upper Volta decided not to go to the [1984 Summer] Olympic Games. Why? How do you explain the fact that other African countries have decided to participate?

*Sankara:* Upper Volta decided not to go, and Burkina Faso has upheld that decision — not because there is not much hope of us bringing home medals, no! — but out of principle. These games, like all other platforms, should be used by us to denounce our enemies and the racism of South Africa. We cannot participate in these games side by side with those who support South Africa's racist policies and those who reject the warnings and condemnations that Africans make aimed at weakening racist South Africa. We do not agree with these forces and have chosen not to participate in the games, even if it means never going to another Olympic Games.

Our position has not been dictated to us by anyone. Every country that has decided not to go has its reasons. Ours have to do with the relations maintained by the British sports world with South Africa. Britain has never accepted any of the particular warnings and protests made against South Africa. Britain has never budged and neither have we. We cannot stand side by side with them while they celebrate. This is a celebration we will not attend. We have no stomach for it.

*Question:* You know that what often scares the Western world, Europe, and France, is the term "revolution." In your speech, you said that "revolution cannot be exported." Is this a way of reassuring those countries that are a little bit afraid? If borders are merely ad-

administrative boundaries, why can't revolution be exported?  
*Sankara*: Revolution can't be exported. You cannot impose a particular ideological choice on any people. Exporting revolution would mean in the first instance that we Burkinabè think we can tell others how to solve their problems. This is a counterrevolutionary view, the view of pseudorevolutionaries, proclaimed by the bookish, dogmatic petty bourgeoisie. If it were true it would mean that we ourselves think we imported our revolution, and as such, we must continue the chain.

This is not the case, though we have said that we are not knowledgeable about the experiences of other peoples, their struggles, their successes, their setbacks. The revolution in Burkina Faso takes into account all other revolutions. The [Russian] revolution of 1917, for example, teaches us many things, and the [French] revolution of 1789, and Monroe's theory of "America to the Americans"<sup>4</sup> likewise — we're interested in all that.

We don't think that having borders that are simply administrative boundaries means that our ideology can invade other countries. If the people of those countries do not accept our ideas, if they reject them, our ideas will not travel very far. For these borders not to be a barrier to ideas, they have to be understood on both sides of the line as mere administrative boundaries. If Burkina Faso sees its borders in this way, but those on the other side of the border see it as a protective wall, you won't find the same process as that between Ghana and Burkina Faso. The more we know about revolution, the more we understand that it represents no danger for the peoples, only strength. Many fear revolution because they don't know it, or because they have only seen excesses as reported by various journalists and media looking for the sensational.

Let's be very precise. We didn't make our revolution to export it, but we don't intend to tie ourselves up in knots to confine the Burkinabè revolution inside an impenetrable fortress. Our revolution is an ideology that blows freely and that is at the service of all those who feel the need to avail themselves of it.

## Notes

1. On the first anniversary of the revolution, the Republic of Upper Volta was renamed Burkina Faso, a combination of words in the Jula and Moore languages meaning Land of Upright Men.
2. Because of a long-standing border dispute, the previous governments of Upper Volta had vetoed Mali's entrance into the West African Monetary

Union (UMOA). Burkina Faso lifted this veto in October 1983.

3. The Brazzaville conference refers to attempts by several African governments to negotiate an end to the civil war in Chad and the withdrawal of foreign troops.

4. In 1823 U.S. President James Monroe formulated a policy warning against European intervention in the Americas. It became known as the Monroe Doctrine.