

## **Thomas Sankara Center for Popular Education and Collective Memory**

Project Leader: Emma-Inemesit Richardson

Sponsoring School: Barnard College

Country: Burkina Faso

Estimated Dates: June 15 - Aug.30

### **Context**

Time and time again, the Burkinabè people have risen. A country famous for resistance, Burkina Faso has the oldest and most successful labor unions in West African history. It has a revolutionary reputation, most famous due to the revolution of 1983-1987 led by President Thomas Sankara. During that four years span, society drastically transformed through campaigns to combat desertification and to promote women's emancipation, food self-sufficiency, childhood vaccination, literacy, popular education, the production and sale of local goods and more. More recently, Burkina Faso is internationally remembered for the popular insurrection of 2014 that overthrew the 27-year long presidency of Blaise Compaore, who is widely believed to be responsible for Sankara's assassination. All these struggles were led by regular Burkinabè people including workers, farmers, students, teachers, youth and elders.

Today, the country is facing tremendous hardships due to the increased violence and militarization, especially in the North of the country. Coming out of a nearly thirty yearlong dictatorship and now combating terrorism and foreign military intervention, many Burkinabè see this as a dark moment in their nation's history. This project seeks to create peace amid conflict through creating a space where people can unify to reconnect with their country's legacy of resistance and revolution. As violence escalates in the country, people need a space to draw on their history and generate solutions that result in peace, self-determination, and ultimately liberation for those experiencing poverty, violence and oppression.

### **Plan**

The Thomas Sankara Center for Popular Education and Collective Memory will serve as a meeting place for activists, students, and community members. The center will include a small Pan-Africanist library with French-language reading material pertaining to activism and resistance across Africa and the diaspora, including multiple publications on Burkinabè history. This will promote literacy and education in a country with one of the world's lowest literacy rates, while providing access to important books that are often unavailable or overpriced to most Burkinabè.

The center will have weekly documentary screenings on a topic relevant to the local struggles. These films may focus on different countries in Africa, the African diaspora, or other parts of the Global South in order to generate solidarity with similar movements elsewhere in the world. Weekly palavers will give community members a space to exchange ideas, discover the root causes of the problems they face, and generate solutions. The palaver, known in Burkina Faso's Mooré language as *tikri*, is the traditional practice of communal problem solving and decision making found across various cultures in Africa. During the palaver, two or three hours will be allotted to allow for people to discuss and debate current events or respond to historical and philosophical questions. The documentary screenings and palavers will be continued by our in-country student partners after we leave the country.

Our team will honor the revolutionary spirit of the Burkinabè people by inviting elders to the center to be interviewed about their memories of and participation in the Burkinabè Revolution of 1983-1987. We will travel to meet elders in their homes and workplaces to conduct interviews when they cannot come to the center. We will also collect the stories of youth and adults of all ages who participated in the popular insurrection of 2014-2015. Their stories will be recorded for future generations in their country as well as for those in the international community that wish to extend greater solidarity with the Burkinabè people. These recordings will be made publicly available in the Thomas Sankara Center.

Both team members will arrive in Ouagadougou in June with books and documentaries purchased in the United States. We have compiled a list of books and documentaries that we will bring with us. In the first couple of days after arrival, all the materials will be set up for the space to be open to the public. One day of the week will be dedicated to hosting palavers and another will be dedicated to showing documentaries. Three days of the week will be days set aside to record stories and oral histories. These will be copyrighted and then published online on a website we create. They will be incorporated into an anthology and then be donated to the library. If someone on the team leaves the center to record oral histories, another team member will remain at the center so that it will still be open to the public. Most interviews will be conducted in French; however, our in-country partners will help translate from Mooré when necessary. The center will be open six days of the week from morning to

evening. Upon departure, the project will be continued by the university students and faculty who have agreed to take on this project upon the departure of US team members.

### Goals

- To use the recollection of history as a tool for current struggles and conflict resolution
- To increase unity and solidarity between the Burkinabè people and those across Africa, the African Diaspora, the Global South and the world at large
- To recognize and promote the validity of various pedagogical mediums including written text, film, palaver and oral history
- To record histories of the revolution and insurrection for future generations
- To explore the relationship between peace, resistance and collective liberation

### Local Partners

The center will be located at the *Université de Ouagadougou Joseph Ki-Zerbo*, a public university with a library that is accessible to both students and the general public. The creation of the center on the university's campus will be made possible by our contact, **Dr. Fatou Sanou**, and her connections to the university president, the director of cultural affairs and the greater administration. While the logistics of the exact location of the center is still being discussed, the university has approved of its creation on campus. This serves as the best site for this project because it is a hub for student activists and community organizers as well as those with scholarly interests in Burkinabè history. Despite being the largest educational institution in Burkina Faso, the *Université de Ouagadougou* lacks the funding and resources necessary to construct educational centers of this nature.

We will also work with law student and student activist, **François Guebré**, who has close relationships with several organizers of the 2014 insurrection, elders who participated in the revolution of the 1980s, and student activists on campus. He has agreed to help with the construction and maintenance of this center and the recruitment of interviewees. **Salimata Sawadogo**, our partner with established partnerships with the local media, will help our team market events through her various connections with local media in Ouagadougou including the radio and television program *La Savane* and other similar shows. Furthermore, our team will promote our events through our own social media platform as well as through the platform of activists we have relationships with. This includes people like **Hervi Outtara**, a famous leader of the 2014 insurrection, and **Océan**, a political reggae singer and a child participant in the revolution of the 1980s. Finally, **Fabrice Simporté**, an activist and Pan-Africanist organizer, will serve as a lead coordinator in the creation and execution of this project. He will help us facilitate relationships with the Ouagadougou community and act as a consultant for any questions or concerns that may come up. As a French, English and Mooré speaker, he will be able to assist with any activities that require translation.

### Team

- **Emma-Inemesit Richardson** is a student of Comparative Literature and Africana Studies at Barnard College. She has extensive experience travelling and conducting research in West Africa including in Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal as well as additional international experience in Togo and African diasporic communities of Brazil, Cuba and Honduras. Between December 2019 and January 2020, she travelled to Burkina Faso to interview activists for a documentary film and connected with many of the in-country community partners. She is a French speaker who has experience conducting interviews in French.
- **Jake Stanton** is a Brown University student studying Africana Studies and Physics. He has spent extensive time studying African history, Pan-Africanism and Afro-Indigenous conceptions of life, spirituality and the universe. Has studied and travelled in Ghana, Togo, Nigeria and Ivory Coast. He will rely on basic French and translations from Richardson and Simporté as he improves his language skills.