

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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***Approaching sandstorm near Titao,  
Yatenga province.***

*(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)*



## INTRODUCTION

This book is about a courageous but endangered people, and about their land, the land of their gods and their ancestors, a harsh land where the essential patterns and values of life withstood all challenges for a thousand years. It is about their collision with the twentieth century, their fortitude in the face of change all around them, and their dilemmas as they see their land now half-dying under the stresses of climate, cultural erosion, and misbegotten kindnesses.

Burkina Faso: 'Land of the People of Integrity'. A country of nine million people and 7,000 villages stretching from the arid fringe of the Sahara in the north to green landscapes in the south west. Many villages struggle against the odds for the barest survival; others are mobilising what resources they have, sometimes with a little outside help and encouragement, to try to regain control of their lives.

Revival in the Sahel? It is a tantalising question whether even survival — let alone revival — will be possible for this arid belt of land which forms the southern fringe of the whole Sahara desert and takes in Burkina's northern provinces. After twenty years of recurrent drought, the pressure of more people on fewer resources, and the uncertain impact of global warming still to come, the outlook, on the face of it, is scarcely promising.

Less than a quarter of Burkina's land area, in fact, qualifies as strictly Sahelian, receiving under 300 mm of rain a year, while the south and south west may get up to four times that amount. In between, however, lie the heavily-populated and semi-arid areas of the Mossi plateau, in many aspects an extension of the Sahel, which thus conditions much of the reality of people's lives and the constraints they face.

Throughout history, fate has dealt severely with the people of the Sahel, who inhabit some of the most dust-dry margins of the liveable earth. But today that fate is no longer in the hands of their great deity, Wende. Instead it is a secular fate, calculated in gross national product, debt servicing ratios, and infant mortality rates. And by all these yardsticks, Burkina Faso is one of the poorest countries in the world, many of its people malnourished, illiterate, and afflicted with all the ills that flesh is heir to. This, we are told, is the truth about Burkina. And there are plenty of statistics to prove it. You will find some of them in this book. Poverty, however, is only one dimension of life for the people of Burkina, and many expert foreign advisers have seen their grand projects founder because they came with only one-dimensional solutions to offer.

In the following pages, this account of development in Burkina Faso today tries to convey something of the conditions of life, the hopes and aspirations of its people, the conflicts they face and the never-ending struggles which many must endure in order to have any future at all. It focuses particularly on the Sahelian zone, because that is where people's lives and livelihoods are most directly under threat, and where both the government and foreign agencies have concentrated most of their development efforts. But there is an important caveat. This can only be a secular guide, mostly limited to tangible, measurable realities and the kind of thing that people are prepared to say to a stranger. And what a stranger feels in the Sahel, more strongly than most other places on earth, is the power of the unspoken, the impalpable. Between the lines, therefore, you must read many long silences, a lot of human warmth and laughter, a reverence for all the spirits that have been part of this world since time immemorial — and imagine above it all, from one flat horizon to the other, the great unbroken canopy of sky.



## EMPIRES OF GOLD

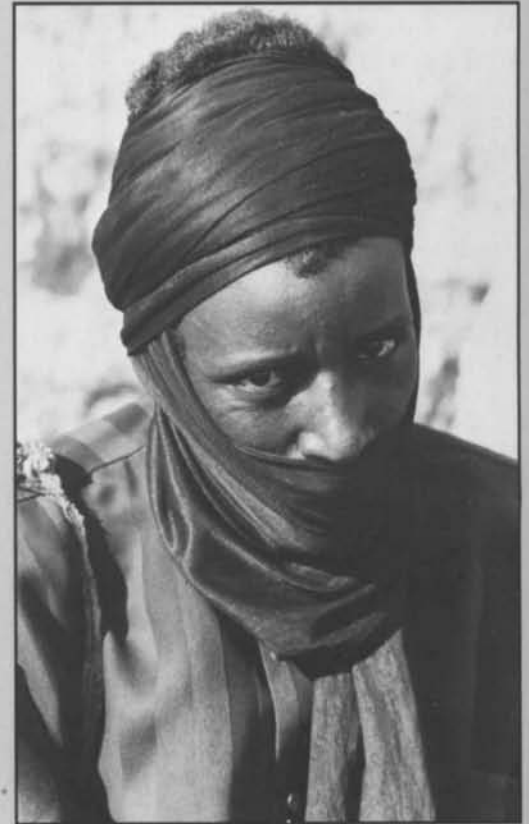
As long ago as 6000 BC, Neolithic people of the Sahel began to discover agriculture. Tribes along the Niger valley cultivated sorghum, millet, some varieties of rice, fonio and sesame — the same crops as are grown there today. And in the rivers they fished with harpoons and nets. The climate at the time was kinder to them than now, with more rain and much thicker vegetation, but soon after came the long period of extreme drought which by 2000 BC had created the present Sahara desert. From then on, the Sahel has become slowly but progressively more arid.

A thousand years ago — at least a century or two before the Norman conquest of Britain — the people of the Sahel knew great wealth. In the year 970, the first recorded empire of West Africa, old Ghana, was described as 'the richest in the world because of its gold'. Founded by the Soninké people on the territory of present-day Mali and Mauritania, that empire boasted an army of 200,000 men, including 40,000 archers and an imposing cavalry. It reached its peak in the tenth century before succumbing to the advance of Islam from the North.

Two centuries later there arose the Empire of Mali, whose most celebrated emperor, Kankou Moussa, made a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, trekking across half the continent laden with gold and with an entourage of 60,000 people. Then, in the sixteenth century, it was the turn of the fabled city of Timbuktu to achieve renown, as the gateway for trans-Saharan trade and a university town with 25,000 students.

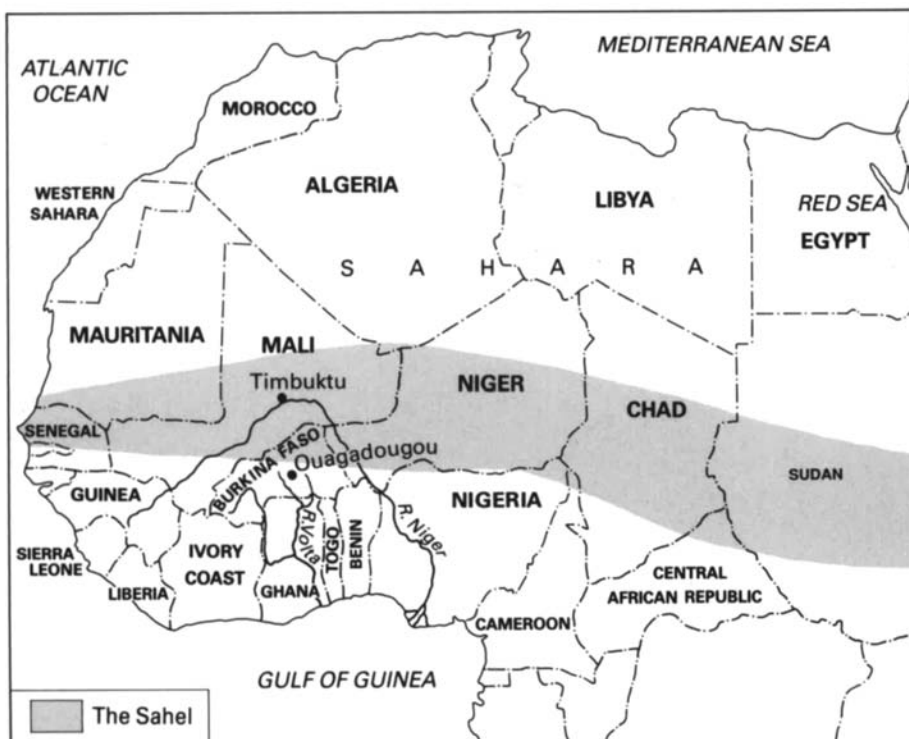
At about the same time, on the central plateau of what is now Burkina Faso, the Mossi people were consolidating their kingdoms, which were to last for another 400 years. The Mossi developed a highly-structured political system with precise customs and observances. There were five kingdoms, the most important in size and population being that of the emperor, the Mogho Naaba of Ouagadougou.

The power of the Mossi dynasty came to an end in 1896 in the reign of Naaba Wobgo, 'the Elephant Emperor', when the French marched in with a column of infantry to begin 64 years of colonial rule. In 1904 the Mossi lands were absorbed in the colony of Upper Senegal-Niger, before the new colony of Upper Volta was created in 1919, with borders similar to those of Burkina today.



*A Touareg cattle herder at Djibo market, Soum province.*

*(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)*



## A RICH MOSAIC OF CULTURES



**A Peul woman in Gorom-Gorom,  
Oudalan province.**

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

Starting from the earliest times, waves of migration from north, south, east and west have made Burkina a melting-pot of languages and cultures. Among the country's nine million people there are no fewer than 60 ethnic groups, speaking at least 15 languages. The presence of some tribes — Gourounsi, Sénoufo, Dogon, Gourmantché, and Bwa — goes back into the mists of time. Over the centuries others arrived as invaders or refugees and were progressively assimilated. Then in the fifteenth century came the Mossi horsemen, probably riding north in search of new lands. In battle, they had the superiority of strong and speedy stallions; in conquest, the certainty of a divine right conferred by their all-powerful god, Wende; and in government, a gift for organisation to set the seal on their authority.

They soon subdued the original inhabitants of the central plateau region and established their kingdoms, which were to endure for four centuries. And throughout that time they fiercely resisted the advance of Islam, as Arab armies from the north overthrew the empires of neighbouring Mali and Niger. Today they remain the dominant ethnic group of Burkina Faso, accounting for about half the population. Other main groups are the Peul (Fulani), Lobi, Mandé, Bobo, Gourounsi, and Gourmantché people — but despite the diversity of language and culture, inter-marriage has been common and today there is little conflict between them.

The Mossi people are settled farmers, their society strongly patriarchal. The Peul tribe, on the other hand, with the nomadic Touaregs who invaded from the desert to the north, are the nation's herders. The ancestors of the Peuls are thought to have made their way here long ago from Ethiopia, 3,000 miles to the east. And in contrast again with the Mossi people, the Lobi tribe in the south west — like many from the forest zone of coastal west Africa — have a matriarchal society which gives their women a large degree of personal and social freedom.

A highly stratified society evolved in the Mossi kingdoms, with the royal family at the top of a pyramid consisting of many different castes: nobles, freemen, musicians and storytellers (*griots*), and slaves. As the political leader of his people, the Mossi emperor, the Mogho Naaba, had a large court of ministers, witch-doctors, entertainers, eunuchs and several hundred wives. At the same time he was and is the supreme religious leader, sharing the divinity of his forebears, who are traced back to the great common ancestor, Gbewa. On the death of an emperor, the chief of the *griots* was called upon to recite from memory the names and accomplishments of all past emperors: a symbolic linking of past and present. And although now restricted to his religious functions, the Mogho Naaba remains the embodiment of tribal authority, which is still a powerful force.

Amid the diversity of their cultures, the people of Burkina Faso — indeed of all the Sahel — hold certain fundamental customs and practices in common. Loyalty, first and foremost, is to one's clan or extended family, and then to one's native village. The family is the beginning and the end: its bonds are both practical (with a hierarchy through which the individual rises in each phase of life) and metaphysical, as embodied in religious observances at the family altar. It is the village, after that, which confers social identity — the framework within which each person learns his or her place in the world, is initiated into adulthood with age-old rituals, and establishes lifetime bonds with those of the same age group.

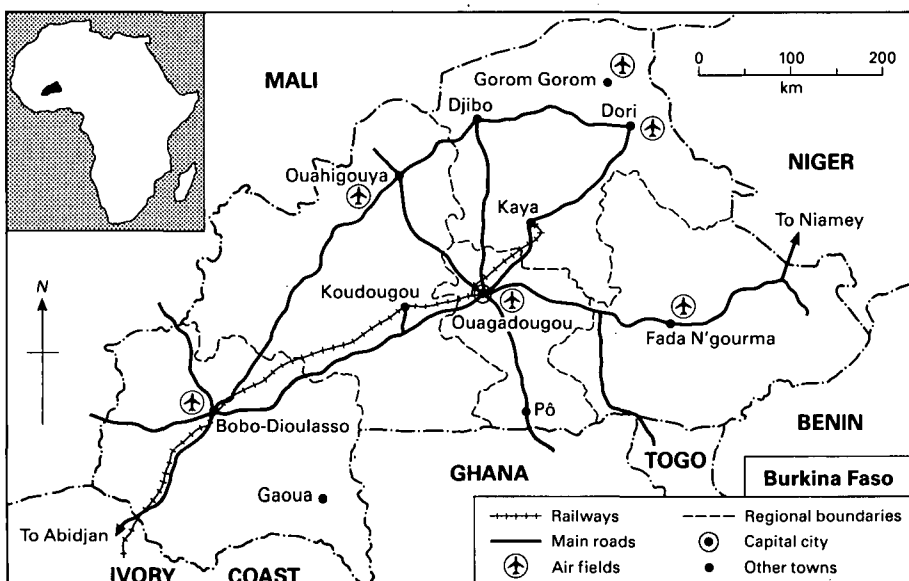
In both family and village, the traditional hierarchies have guaranteed for everyone a measure of security. As long as time stands still, there is everything to be said for equating age with wisdom. Government by the most elderly (gerontocracy) made sense in the Sahel for all the centuries that the essential rules of life remained unchanged.

But in less than 100 years the certainties which gave meaning to people's beliefs, which underpinned the social observances and the moral framework of their lives, have collapsed like a mudbrick wall under heavy rains. The first devastating shock was the imposition by France of a bureaucratic power structure, overriding the traditional systems of authority and respect, which, for the Burkinabè people, held everything else together. Then came colonial laws introducing private land-holding — an anathema to the local people — and attempts to introduce a money economy and modernise farming practices. Farmers were forced to introduce cash crops, needing money income to pay the poll tax levied on them.

A new era of migration then saw millions leaving their home country for paid jobs in the neighbouring French colonies and in Ghana. Most came back in due course, and their money and their new ideas began inevitably to erode the status quo. After independence in 1960, the alien concept of national statehood — in the hands of a privileged few protected by French patronage — deepened the divide between the people and their ruling elite. Then in the early 1970s came the drought, bringing with it not only hunger, destruction of land and crops, and decimation of their herds, but also in bewildering numbers that modern magician, the aid worker. A few carried Bibles, but most were proselytising for that even stranger creed called development. *Money and change equals progress*, it said. But when the little you possess has been won by attrition from the elements and has had to stand the most savage tests of time, 'development' and getting rid of well-tried old things can only seem an incomprehensible risk, if not sheer madness.

At the same time, gerontocracies are by their nature resistant to change, do stifle the ideas of the young, and do perpetuate inequalities — for example, the subordination of women. But this resistance to change has enabled the Mossi people, better than many other West Africans, to preserve their fundamental beliefs against the advances of the missionaries of Islam and, more recently, of Christianity. Over several hundred years, Islam has gained converts south of the Sahara, especially among the rich and powerful, but the mosques which are a feature of any village skyline in neighbouring Mali are much less in evidence here. Some two-thirds of the population adhere to their animist religion, while perhaps 30 per cent are nominally Moslem and 10 per cent Christian. Though often regarded dismissively by Europeans, animist beliefs reflect the spirituality of people who live in harmony with their natural environment. They speak of the essential unity of the visible and invisible worlds. Forces in the natural world are made known through the ancestors and can be used for good or evil: it is humanity which has the moral responsibility of choice. Living people are a continuation of the life stream of the first beings, and the ancestors are each person's intermediaries with the creator of the universe.

*For 30 years, the people of Burkina have watched as the high priests of development have preached sermons and distributed their multi-million dollar alms. But they see it has brought few blessings. They are poorer than before. A handful of middle men have got rich. The griot gives way to the transistor radio, and the sacramental rites of passage which were a unique bond between each person and their world, these too are on the road to extinction. And in return? Is a modern society, even if wished for, any nearer? Has the transfer of many powers to a younger generation opened new paths to advancement, to more democratic values? It would not be advisable to add up the pluses and minuses just yet.*



## ARTS OLD AND NEW

Music and dance, body decoration, fine jewellery and costumes for the king's courtiers, folk tales and stories of magic passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation — these have been the traditional art forms of the Burkinabè people. Their culture is a complex web of spiritual beliefs and social customs.

Each emperor of the Mossi tribe — the supreme religious leader — was immortalised with a statuette by the leading goldsmith-jeweller of his court. After completing this work, which was regarded as the peak of his achievement, the artist had to renounce his profession and go into retreat so as not to be tempted to reproduce it. Thus each emperor's statue was unique. For their intricately-decorated bronze bangles and other jewellery, these artists used the 'lost-wax' technique which is still a standard method of casting for sculptors today. Beautifully-modelled bronze statuettes are now produced in the workshops of Ouagadougou. Pieces costing anything from a few pounds to more than a thousand are displayed on street stalls, in craft shops or hotel boutiques.

The Tapsoba family work in a sculptors' collective, producing everything from ashtrays to splendid equestrian statues of the Mossi emperor, the Mogho Naaba, whose image is no longer sacrosanct. Clay for the moulds comes from a dam nearby; the beeswax for modelling is brought in from surrounding villages.

In the past few years, Burkina Faso has also rapidly acquired an international reputation in one of the principal artforms of the twentieth century — the cinema. With its Panafrican Cinema Festival (FESPACO) every two years, Ouagadougou has become 'the Hollywood of Africa' and Burkinabè directors are winning film prizes and appreciative audiences around the world. One of the best known, Idrissa Ouédraogo, was awarded a special prize at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival for his elegiac story of village life, *Yaaba* (The Grandmother), and he is already at work on another. Since 1986, despite all the problems of getting them financed and distributed, Burkina has been producing two full-length feature films a year.



**Issaka Tapsoba with a statuette made by the 'lost wax' technique in his workshop in Ouagadougou.**

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)



**A statuette of the Mogho Naaba, made in the Tapsoba family workshop in Ouagadougou.**

(Robert Davies/Oxfam)



(Mark Edwards/Oxfam)

## DOWN WITH THE TOADIES!

*'Down with imperialism! Down with the enemies of the people! Down with the embezzlers of public funds! Down with the toadies and thieving rats! Down with the predatory owls that strike in the darkness! Down with the fence-sitting chameleons! Down with the ravenous jackals! Down with the wreckers!'*

**T**homas Sankara, a young and charismatic army officer, was the man who made it his mission to transform Burkina Faso — or Upper Volta, as it was called until he renamed it in 1984. His aim was to bring his country out of the long shadows of poverty, dependence and feudalism. For a new generation of Africans, despairing of their exploitation by the imperialist world economy and by their own incompetent or corrupt leaders, Sankara's was a voice in the wilderness. His message to his own people, and to Africans everywhere, was that they should take destiny into their own hands, struggle proudly for their future, and reject domination or interference from any source, whether in their village, country or the world at large.

Sankara had a dazzlingly original line in revolutionary rhetoric, and his words resounded across the continent. He was hailed as a prophet of the people's liberation. At home, the revolution which brought him to power in 1983 set about dismantling both the old tribal power structures, deemed reactionary and obscurantist, and the privileges of the urban elite, which had become entrenched at the expense of the rural poor.



**A village pharmacist in Sapone, Bazéga province. Nearly 300 dispensaries were built in the 18 months after the revolution in 1983.**

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

*'After a year and a half of revolution, we can pride ourselves on having constructed schools, clinics and dams, built roads, increased our farmland, and carried out reforestation. We can also take pride in having provided housing for the people. But this is not enough. Much more remains to be done. Most important is the effort we have made to transform people's attitudes. Each one of us now feels that wielding power is his business, that the destiny of Burkina Faso is the business not just of certain people but of all Burkinabès. Everyone has something to say. Each one of us demands an accounting from the other. Never again will things be done as before. No longer will the wealth of our country belong to a minority. This wealth belongs to the majority, a majority that speaks its mind.'* (Thomas Sankara)

Before the revolution, 23 years of independence and a succession of governments — following policies largely prescribed by the French or other foreign advisers — had left Burkina in a sorry state. Political independence was fine for the educated elite who inherited the colonialists' mantle and who had learned the discreet charms and perquisites of power. But for the ordinary people, the rural poor, political independence meant little and brought less.

During the 1970s, agricultural output per person fell by 13 per cent. At the end of the decade, fewer than two people in a hundred had access to electricity. This was not a developing country. For the great majority, prospects of a decent life were shrinking year by year.

Political independence meant little to the ordinary people of Burkina, to begin with, because their concept of society had nothing to do with the modern nation-state. The governments of the 1960s and 1970s had shown no understanding of the need to create a new iconography, a new symbolic framework, as the basis for nation-building. But Thomas Sankara understood this very well. On the first anniversary of the revolution he gave his country a proud new name, a new anthem and a new flag. To underscore his commitment to radical changes giving power to the people, he himself maintained a spartan lifestyle. Sometimes he rode around Ouagadougou on a bicycle, played the guitar at mass rallies, or summoned ambassadors to present their credentials in a village, saying 'Tell *them* (the villagers) why you are here.'

The salaries of civil servants were slashed, officials were obliged to declare their personal wealth, and government ministers were allowed only a Renault 5 as their official car. The previous regime's fleet of Mercedes-Benz limousines were put up as special prizes in the national lottery.

The revolution sought to signal a new kind of independence — the liberation and progress of the people through their own efforts — but also, and more fundamentally, a new vision of society incompatible with the old. Sankara it was who inspired them with this vision and, at least for a little while, galvanised them into action. In less than 18 months, under the People's Development Programme, peasants and townspeople put their shoulders together and built over 300 schools, 280 dispensaries, 550 housing units and 260 dams, in addition to nearly 1,000 wells and boreholes. Available water supplies rose from under nine million tons in 1983 to 300 million tons in 1986.

From Day 1, to implement his programme of reforms, Sankara had created Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs) in every town and village throughout the country, eclipsing the traditional village chiefs. Many of these CDRs genuinely represented the will of the people, whose repressed energies were mobilised in projects for their own development. Others, however, with their kalashnikovs to enforce obedience, behaved arrogantly, made the people work for no payment, and were sometimes little better than bandits.

Impatient for change, Sankara issued policy edicts with little or no coherent planning, and alienated one by one the political and social forces which had backed the revolution. As his actions became more arbitrary, so he himself became more and more isolated. In retrospect, his downfall evokes all the inevitability of a Shakespearian tragedy: a good man challenging forces beyond his control, in this case the well-off town-dwellers — officials and merchants doing nicely as things were — and all the retinue of workers under their patronage.

Four years after he moved into the presidential palace, a flurry of anonymous pamphlets attacking Sankara began to circulate in Ouagadougou. A new struggle for power was under way. On October 15, 1987, the 37-year-old President and 12 of his closest aides were assassinated by the troops of his long-time friend and fellow officer, Blaise Compaoré. Shock waves reverberated around the country and far beyond. African heads of state who carried no particular torch for Sankara deplored his brutal elimination, and for some time the new President Compaoré found himself ostracised by many.

His first major task was one of national reconciliation: to regain the confidence and support of those organisations — political groups and trade unions in particular — which had turned against the revolution under Sankara's autocratic reign. Dialogue was the order of the day, including new talks with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and overtures to personalities of the pre-revolutionary period, hitherto vilified as the running dogs of capitalism.

Compaoré's Popular Front replaced the National Revolutionary Council; unarmed Revolutionary Committees took over from the gun-toting CDRs. An uneasy calm returned to daily life. The people, their volatile hero in his grave, turned their backs once again on Ouagadougou: the plots and in-fighting between elite factions in the capital were essentially an irrelevance for them. As a gesture of disdain, the revolutionary rallying-cry *La patrie ou la mort, nous vaincrons* (The fatherland or death, we shall triumph) was mercilessly parodied. One variant: *La patrie ou l'amour, nous verrons* (The fatherland or love, we'll see).

The revolution, said Compaoré, would continue. But his policy of 'rectification', while undoubtedly redressing some of the excesses of the first four years, seemed to many a way of ditching the egalitarian principles which had provided its moral foundation. The other two 'historic leaders' of the revolution — Henri Zongo and Jean-Baptiste Lingani — were less than lukewarm about the President's distinct shift to the right in the name of consensus-building. Though retaining cabinet posts, they found themselves progressively excluded from policy-making after Sankara's death, yet they represented a potential opposition that Compaoré could not ignore.

In September 1989, Zongo and Lingani were arrested and summarily executed; it was alleged that they had plotted a coup. The ordinary Burkinabè could only shrug in resignation, noting meanwhile that Compaoré had just set up a new militia with the vague purpose of 'safeguarding the achievements of the revolution'. Towards the end of 1989, residents of Ouaga found themselves subject to new stop-and-search patrols.

While some commentators see the Compaoré regime as an improvement, not least economically, on what had gone before, others — at least until early 1990 — feared further repression of civil liberties. Then, however, the government announced the establishment of a consultative body to draw up a new Constitution, and a new law was passed to allow freer public debate in the media. These are encouraging signs, even though it is difficult to discern the overall thrust of government policies, as the World Bank, an important new influence in post-revolutionary Burkina, candidly admits: 'The likely future directions of the new policies are not clear,' it says. 'The present combination of militant ideology and pragmatism generates complex messages whose deeper meaning is not easy to decipher.'

While the outside world waits to see if Compaoré will long survive the three comrades-in-arms he has buried, the President himself is beset by no such doubts. A new presidential palace is now being built in Ouagadougou, costing something over £15 million.

Looking back on the Sankara years, Albertine Lankwandé, an official of the Burkina Women's Union in the province of Gourma, says, 'Sankara was devoted to his country, but his regime was too hard for us; the country is too poor and he jumped into too many things. As soon as one job was finished, we immediately had to start another. Contributions were demanded from the people for building a school or a cinema, but the people just didn't have the money. So Sankara was a hard task-master. He expected everyone to make sacrifices, but that's pretty difficult when you start with nothing.'



**'Now it's our turn to have our say - the peasants of Burkina.'** Roadside poster in Bobo-Dioulasso.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

## CAPITALISM WITH A MARXIST FACE



**'Eat Burkinabè!' - a government poster in Bobo-Dioulasso urges self-sufficiency.**

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)



**How will structural adjustment affect the poorest people of Burkina? - Longa village, Yatenga province.**

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

No wonder the World Bank is bemused. Here is a government declaring its commitment to a revolution founded on the principles of Marxism-Leninism, yet with a leader who says, 'We need a development of capitalism; for us it has never been a question of socialism.' To square the circle, the formula adopted by President Compaoré's Popular Front is a policy of 'state capitalism'. And the World Bank and IMF, in prescribing the economic medicine which Burkina will have to swallow to get some big development loans, seem prepared to take it on trust.

In fact, on the purely economic criteria of making ends meet, the country is in better shape than many others of sub-Saharan Africa. Though among the very poorest, it is one of the few to have notched up regular annual increases in national income, with growth since the revolution averaging 4.6 per cent a year. This is faster than the rise in population and compares with annual growth of 3.1 per cent over the preceding five years. In 1988 this represented an annual money income of about £135 a year for the average Burkinabè.

Foreign debt soared from US\$134 million to \$742 million in the decade to 1987, and debt repayment liabilities escalated almost tenfold to \$50 million a year. But while this is not regarded as a serious problem by the World Bank, state revenue falls far short of government spending requirements, and the country has a huge trade gap. Exports, though rising healthily with big increases in gold and cotton sales, cover only half the cost of the country's imports. The trade deficit in 1987 reached more than £150 million.

But beyond the purely economic criteria of development, there is not much comfort. The new 'Human Development Index' published by the UN Development Programme in May 1990 — which ranks countries according to their people's literacy, life expectancy and purchasing power — finds Burkina third from bottom of the global league table. Out of 130 countries, only nearby Niger and Mali fare worse.

Thomas Sankara's National Revolutionary Council drew up a five-year development plan for 1986-90, with a budget of £1,200 million, of which a little over half would be spent on services such as transport, energy and water; 20 per cent for agriculture and livestock; 9 per cent on mining and manufacturing; 4.2 per cent on education and training; 3.2 per cent on health, and 2.5 per cent on housing. More than four-fifths of the money needed was expected to come from foreign sources, but in the first year less than half the funds available were actually spent: there simply weren't the trained staff needed to handle more than that.

Negotiating to introduce a Structural Adjustment Programme, the World Bank and the Burkina government insist that the country's economy is basically sound, and that very severe measures, which hit the poor hardest, will not be required. But it is not at all clear if the Bank's funds can be absorbed better than those of the Five-Year Plan.

There are two glaring omissions in the World Bank's two-volume report on Burkina, produced in 1989. First, and perhaps symptomatic of the post-Sankara mood, is the failure to consider the vital role of women in Burkina's economy. Second, in looking for ways to restructure government expenditure, the report makes no mention of the largest ministerial budget of all: defence. In 1989 the military government budgeted £40 million for defence — almost 20 per cent of its total resources, three times the allocation for health and nearly six times as much as for agriculture. To all this, the World Bank turns a blind eye.

## GETTING ORGANISED

**B**urkina is a great country for organisations. Visitors may be forgiven for thinking otherwise, because a large number of them don't actually work, but wherever a group of Burkinabès gather together around a particular problem, they will invariably set up an association, a committee or a co-operative to tackle it.

Most of the organisations which do work well for their members are in the rural areas. In town, the most visible — and frequently least effective — are either appendages of the government bureaucracy, or political or social groups serving above all the interests of those who control them.

On the other hand, a recent study in six of the country's 30 provinces found a 'remarkable dynamic' among village groups, with more than 3,800 associations in the 1,780 villages surveyed. A most notable feature of this phenomenon has been the growth of the Groupements Naam — groups based on a traditional Mossi form of young people's association for community work. In recreating the original Naam concept, the groups' founder, Bernard Lédéa Ouédraogo, introduced one innovation: he gave them economic objectives.

Each Groupement is normally directed by a management committee including men and women, although some groups are specifically for one sex or the other. The group as a whole decides on its objectives, while the committee looks after the management of funds, credit, community work sites and the appointment of an animator. In the past 12 years they have expanded rapidly, spreading from Yatenga, where they began, to 17 other provinces. They are closely linked with the Association Six-S, another brainchild of Mr Ouédraogo, which raises funds internationally to provide the village-level groups with the training, equipment and financial resources they need to push forward their development activities.

*The Zemstaaba women's cooperative in Tanghin-Barrage, Ouagadougou. With a start-up loan from Oxfam, the group is earning money by rearing pigs, making baskets, and constructing slow-burning cookers for sale.*

*(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)*



At the other end of the organisational spectrum stand Burkina's political parties. Under the Marxist banner of the revolution a strong Communist Party would be expected. But Burkina manages to have no fewer than six Communist parties, each with a distinct interpretation of the Marxist message, and each at loggerheads with the others most of the time. Until recently other parties were banned. So the intellectual elites in Ouagadougou could indulge themselves with a wide range of political choice: any colour they liked so long as it was red. Now, however, the Popular Front has opened its doors to two non-Communist parties as well.

Somewhere between the politicians and the peasants come all the organisational ganglia of the government bureaucracy. Each Ministry, it seems, is busy setting up a new Office for this, a new Service for that, a new Unit for the other. All eminently desirable and admirably planned; it's just that many of them lack the basic staff or equipment actually to do the job intended.

Decentralising government functions to the provinces should be an excellent idea, but too often the result, in practice, is a lot of city bureaucrats-in-exile trying to do too much with too little. On top of this, the rural government agent is sometimes unsuitable for the job, possibly fed up at being banished to the bush, and can therefore seem, in the eyes of the local people, more trouble than he's worth.

These shortcomings, however, do not imply anything basically wrong with the organisational strategy. Though Burkina's rural extension workers have been better paid, trained and equipped than many in surrounding countries, the problem remains essentially one of inadequate means, coupled with a need for better co-ordination between agencies.

### **TRADE UNIONS: A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH**

In most of Africa, the trade union movement has little independence and less clout. But Burkina is different. Here, individual unions thrive and are an important element of the nation's political life (in the cities, at least).

The teachers' union, closely linked to a political party associated with one of the pre-revolutionary regimes, was the first to come out in opposition to the Sankara government. When their leaders were arrested in March 1984, the teachers went on strike. The government retaliated by firing 2,600 of them. Initially, the Confederation of Burkinabè Unions supported the revolution, but soon changed its mind. By early 1985 there was a broad Trade Union Front denouncing the government for 'the constant worsening of the disastrous conditions of life of the working masses'.

In the context of African politics, Burkina's trade unions may indeed hold an unusual if not unique place on the national scene. For one thing, they are now the only people's movement outside the Popular Front. But the working masses they claim to represent are in reality no more than a small minority, consisting almost entirely of salaried urban workers.

The conflict between Sankara and the trade unions intensified from 1985, with many union leaders arrested and tortured. Was this a factor in his downfall? All that is known is that Blaise Compaoré began to distance himself from Sankara's bitter campaign before the coup and has since sought to bring the unions back into the fold.

It may appear one of the ironies of the revolution that the trade unions have been rehabilitated under a regime dedicated to 'state capitalism', after being hounded under one ostensibly committed to supporting the workers through class struggle. But for Sankara, 'the workers' meant the 90 per cent of his people living in the rural areas, while under Compaoré the centre of political gravity has reverted to the cities, where the unions can play their power games. It's really all quite logical.

