# Revolutionary Martyrs

*AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Sankara, Lumumba, and Cabral*

## Thomas Sankara (1949-1987), Burkina Faso

Thomas Sankara's four-year revolution in Burkina Faso, launched by coup in 1983 at age 33, was the most comprehensive attempt at radical self-reliant development in post-colonial African history — and the most personal. Sankara lived what he preached with a consistency almost unprecedented among African heads of state: he paid himself the lowest presidential salary in Africa, sold off the government's Mercedes fleet for Renault 5s, and turned off his own air conditioning before telling his government to do the same.

His achievements in four years were extraordinary given the starting conditions: mass vaccination campaigns that immunised millions of children in weeks using volunteer health workers; over ten million trees planted against the advancing Sahara; agricultural policy restructured toward food self-sufficiency; and, remarkably for any leader of his era, a radical programme banning female genital mutilation and forced marriages, appointing women to his cabinet and military, and declaring: 'There is no true social revolution without the liberation of women.'

On 29 July 1987, at an OAU summit in Addis Ababa, Sankara delivered what is arguably the most defiant economic statement ever given by an African head of state, proposing that African nations collectively refuse to pay foreign debts he argued were designed to keep Africa permanently dependent.

> *"Debt is a cleverly managed reconquest of Africa, intended to subjugate its growth and development through foreign rules. Those who lend us money are those who had colonised us before."*
>
> **— Thomas Sankara, OAU Summit Speech, Addis Ababa, 29 July 1987**

The speech was received with embarrassed silence. Three months later, on 15 October 1987, Sankara was assassinated in a coup led by his former friend Blaise Compaoré, believed to have been supported by France and Côte d'Ivoire — after which Compaoré ruled for 27 years, returning the country to the dependency and corruption Sankara had

fought. His legacy has proved more durable than his assassins anticipated: his portrait appears on walls from Dakar to Nairobi to Lagos, and his ideas about debt, women's liberation, and self-reliance are more relevant to young Africans than ever.

## Patrice Lumumba (1925-1961), Democratic Republic of Congo

Patrice Lumumba's life lasted thirty-five years. His time as the Congo's first Prime Minister lasted approximately eleven weeks. In that time, he faced a military mutiny, a Belgian military invasion, the secession of his richest province backed by foreign mining interests, an unreliable UN peacekeeping force, and the active hostility of the United States, Belgium, and Britain. No leader in African history was handed a more impossible situation, and none behaved with more dignity or clarity about what was at stake.

A former postal clerk who founded the Mouvement National Congolais in 1958 as the only genuinely national, non-tribal political party in the Congo, Lumumba was deeply influenced by Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism. His independence speech on 30 June 1960 — which spoke of colonial brutality directly to the face of the Belgian King — shocked the West and electrified Africa. When Katanga province seceded with Belgian mining backing, Lumumba appealed first to the UN, then to the Soviet Union — a move that triggered intense CIA alarm. He was deposed in a coup by Colonel Mobutu on 14 September 1960, with CIA and Belgian backing, then arrested, tortured, and executed on 17 January 1961. His body was dissolved in acid by a Belgian police officer to prevent the creation of a martyr's grave.

The CIA's role is no longer deniable: the 1975 Senate Church Committee hearings revealed a direct assassination plot, and even where that specific plot was not carried out, the CIA worked with Mobutu and the Katangan secessionists to ensure Lumumba's removal and death. The question his murder forces is unavoidable: what would the Congo have been if he had lived? Today's Democratic Republic of Congo sits on an estimated 24 trillion dollars of mineral wealth and remains one of the poorest, most war-torn nations on earth. Mobutu, installed in Lumumba's place, stole an estimated five billion dollars over thirty-two years of rule. The story of what the Congo became after Lumumba's murder is the most powerful possible argument for what that murder cost — not just the Congo, but Africa and the world.

> *"No Brutus, no Judas, no colonel bought by foreign money will ever be able to kill ideas which are armed with the complete truth."*
>
> **— Patrice Lumumba, his last known letter, written in captivity, January 1961**

## Amílcar Cabral (1924-1973), Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde

What distinguished Amílcar Cabral from virtually every other African liberation leader was the depth and originality of his theoretical thinking. An agronomist by training — the only African student in his class in Lisbon — he conducted the first agricultural census of Guinea-Bissau, giving him unparalleled knowledge of his country's land, people, and social structure before he co-founded the PAIGC in 1956 and built a guerrilla army from scratch that, by 1972, controlled two-thirds of the territory.

Cabral's most original contribution was his concept of 'class suicide' — the idea that the African petty bourgeoisie, the educated, semi-Westernised middle class, must consciously renounce its class privileges and identify fully with the peasant masses in order to lead a genuine liberation movement. This addressed directly the danger Fanon had also identified: that political independence would simply replace colonial administrators with African administrators serving the same class interests. His related concept of 'return to the source' — the necessity for the colonised intellectual to reconnect with the cultural values of ordinary African people — required going to the villages and subordinating intellectual pride to the wisdom of people who knew their land and culture far better than any foreign-educated intellectual.

Unlike most liberation movements, the PAIGC built liberated zones under its control with functioning schools, hospitals, courts, and democratic governance structures — governing in practice before the formal independence Cabral would not live to see. He was assassinated in Conakry on 20 January 1973 by agents of the Portuguese secret police working through disaffected PAIGC members, nine months before Guinea-Bissau declared the independence his theory and organisation had made possible.

| **Revolutionary Martyrs: At a Glance** |
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| Thomas Sankara: in power 4 years; banned FGM and forced marriage; assassinated at 37, aged 15 October 1987. |

| Revolutionary Martyrs: At a Glance |
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| Patrice Lumumba: in power approximately 11 weeks; assassinated at 35, with confirmed CIA and Belgian involvement. |
| Amílcar Cabral: built liberated zones with functioning governance before independence; assassinated at 48, nine months before Guinea-Bissau's independence. |
| Shared pattern: all three pursued genuine African economic sovereignty and were removed through a combination of internal collaborators and external powers with an interest in African dependency. |

## Key Takeaways

Sankara, Lumumba, and Cabral each pursued a form of genuine African economic and political sovereignty that threatened powerful external and internal interests — and each paid for it with their lives, at ages 37, 35, and 48 respectively. Their murders form a pattern, not a coincidence: African leaders who moved decisively toward real independence were consistently removed through the collaboration of internal actors and external powers invested in continued African dependency. The next lesson turns to three women whose contributions to this same struggle have too often been written out of the story.