

Why Kwame Nkrumah's Socialist, Pan-African Vision Continues to Inspire Radicals Today

Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah was a postcolonial icon who tried to fight the forces of imperialism and capitalism to build a nation, continent, and world based on equality and self-government. That's why, despite his faults, young people in Ghana today are resurrecting Nkrumah's vision as a radical alternative to neoliberalism.



Kwame Nkrumah, president of Ghana, arrives at Marlborough House in London on June 25, 1965. (Roger Jackson / Getty Images)

On March 6, 1957, Kwame Nkrumah took to the stage in Accra to announce the independence of the Gold Coast, renamed Ghana in homage to the ancient West African empire. Nkrumah declared that 1957 marked the birth of a new Africa, ready

to fight its own battles and show that black people were capable of managing their own affairs. “Our independence is meaningless,” Nkrumah [famously maintained](#), “unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent.”

Ghana was the first African country south of the Sahara to win independence, and three years later Nkrumah promoted himself to president of Ghana, a post he held until 1966. A Pan-African socialist, he sought to unite and quickly industrialize the country, putting it on a path that could resist the twin threats of capitalism and imperialism. When his efforts attracted internal dissent, however, he cracked down. Ghana became a one-party state (led by the Convention People’s Party, the CPP), with strong repression of dissent.

In 1966, Nkrumah’s enemies in the army overthrew him, as Western powers, as they usually do, looked the other way. His ideas — partly formed in the United States, where he spent a decade in the 1930s and ’40s — were largely marginalized in the 1970s as the successive government made a rightward turn. He died in Romania in 1972, following his exile in Sékou Touré’s Guinea.

But Nkrumah [is making something of a comeback](#). With both major parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP), pushing different variants of neoliberalism, young people in organizations like the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) are returning to Nkrumah to think about the role of the state, development, and about Ghana’s (and indeed, Africa’s) place in the world.

As part of their new [AIAC Talk series](#), *Africa Is a Country*’s William Shoki and Sean Jacobs spoke this week with historian Benjamin Talton — a native of Harlem, New York City, once a hotbed of Pan-Africanist organizing of the kind promoted by Nkrumah — and Anakwa Dwamena, a native of Ghana who serves as books editor at *Africa Is a Country* and a member of the *New Yorker*’s editorial staff. Their conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

William Shoki

The mid-twentieth century was a period of massive transformation, and Kwame Nkrumah burst onto the scene to become a great Pan-African leader. How do we place him in this historical context? Who is he, and how does he come onto the scene?

Benjamin Talton

We could even debate that framing you gave. It’s the Kwame Nkrumah I had when I first went to Ghana in 1999, this champion of independence that bursts onto the scene, this visionary Pan-Africanist, who then had this tragic demise. But when I arrived, I encountered all these debates and arguments, and I’m like, “Wow, people just don’t love Kwame Nkrumah.” I’m hanging out with people whose families were destroyed by Kwame Nkrumah, who really despise the man.

It blew me away, coming from the diaspora, coming from the United States, where he was celebrated, particularly by people of my generation’s parents, who were naming their kids Kwame. So, that framing is the popular framing, but then the meat on the bones is quite different.

The vision that Nkrumah and the CPP had in the second half of the 1950s was, we're building a model postcolonial state — truly self-determined, truly independent, fighting against neo-imperialism, fighting against capitalism. Self-determination for the individual and for the state. But then suddenly we get into '61, '62, '63, and they're battling forces from without and from within, and Ghana becomes this police state. I think you see Nkrumah not really trusting his own people, and that's the Nkrumah that we have to grapple with — where he saw himself as the only one who could accomplish that vision.

Now, I'm sympathetic, because imperialism and capitalism are real enemies of the people. But the police state is really when things get problematic, and the Preventive Detention Act, where anyone who criticizes the state, who they think will be against the state or be against the regime (and Nkrumah is the state), can be arrested.

Anakwa Dwamena

Being born and raised in Ghana, Nkrumah existed as this national figure, but someone that I didn't necessarily get much concrete information on. I moved to America, and it's here that I found this great interest in Pan-Africanism: people get excited to hear that I'm from Ghana; someone I ran into on the street who was an alum of Lincoln University [Nkrumah's alma mater] gave me a hug. And so I start to look into Nkrumah and, like you said, "This is this wonderful guy. This is this guy who's done all these great things."

For me, one of the saddest things was reading [Dark Days in Ghana](#) [1968] and his [letters from Conakry](#), where you see that he has this idea that he is the only one who can make any change. It seems a betrayal of the Nkrumah who was an organizer back in Harlem and in Philly, and who broke away from the [United Gold Coast Convention] UGCC and had this radical project.

I was recently reading this book by [Grace Lee Boggs](#), the famous organizer affiliated with [Trinidadian Marxist] C. L. R. James, and she mentions that when she and [her husband](#) [James Boggs] visited Nkrumah, Nkrumah said that he wished they had gotten married, because with her ruling the east, being Chinese, and him ruling Africa [as a black American], they could have some sort of monarchical state or control of the world. And so you get the sense that Nkrumah had kind of lost it toward the end.

William Shoki

The postcolonial period coincided with the Cold War, which was a time, globally, of mass suspicion and paranoia. And so these postcolonial leaders trying to usher their countries into a new world are, to paraphrase Marx, doing it in circumstances not of their own choosing. What was Nkrumah trying to accomplish when Ghana became independent in 1957, and what challenges did he face?

Benjamin Talton

I think it's important to put him in that context, because there are these broader forces going on. I see Nkrumah as very clear-eyed about the challenges that Ghana was facing — relying, basically, on cocoa and a little gold, Europeans very much interested in postcolonial exploitation — so he understood their economic and political weaknesses.

This effort to diversify the economy as rapidly as possible, to achieve this socialist state, a self-determined and independent state — this was visionary, and it was brave. And he accomplished a great deal in a short period of time. You think about creating [Akosombo Dam](#), which was supposed to make Ghana independent in terms of electricity, and use that electricity to turn bauxite into aluminum, for export. But then you run into challenges of finance. You don't have the capital to do that. So, you reach out to the Soviets, ultimately you reached out to the Americans and the Brits. As he struggled to create this economically independent state, the irony is that he's having to rely on capital from the outside. So, there's this catch-22. And we see this in other states. Most postcolonial African countries are facing the same challenge of, "How do we develop rapidly without capital?" You can't do it.

One of the downsides of rapid development — and I don't want to act like I'm just criticizing him on all fronts — is that there is this neglect of the rural areas when you focus on industrial development. It's a people-centered economy that's not really centered on the people as they are.

So, there are these upsides and downsides to the way that he approached it. But I think this broader, global, Cold War postcolonial context is very, very important. He didn't exist in a vacuum.

Anakwa Dwamena

When he hits the scene, there is the UGCC, which he has broken away from, but there are also people who are coming from the Aborigines' Rights Protection Society — people that, whether or not they're royalty, have a vested interest in a connection to the European colonial state.

Nkrumah arrives on the scene, and they think, "Wait a minute. We do want some sort of independence, but not with this radical guy who has come up with this new economic system. We actually like the way certain things are run." Nkrumah didn't indulge the chiefs too much, and that was an issue for some people as well.

And so, he was caught between these two [domestic and international opponents] and was compelled to somehow make a new society that appeals to or can work with people from different interests, who are colliding on him in that one moment.

Benjamin Talton

What I think is amazing is he succeeded in creating an integrated state. There is such a thing as being Ghanaian. Ghanaians on the ground identify themselves as Ghanaians in a particular way. It's not unique on the continent, but it certainly stands out. If you're in the north, if you're in the south, in the east, you go there and there's this sense of pride in being Ghanaian. There's this idea that there is such a thing as being Ghanaian.

It's not to say that every election has gone off swimmingly, without ethnic strife or conflict, but the relative success of Ghana's democracy since the Fourth Republic was established in 1992. A lot of that has to do with what Nkrumah and the CPP built in the '50s and early '60s. It's a different constitution, but this integrated state of Ghana, this idea of being Ghanaian, that's a strong part of Nkrumah's legacy.

What Nkrumah was very jealously protecting the state against was the influence of capitalists, mainly the United States, and the former imperialists, Britain, having

control of them economically. Today, we see these [military agreements](#) being made between the United States and Ghana — I think Nkrumah would be shocked. And he would be very shocked at the neoliberal turn, because the NDC and the NPP, both are neoliberal political parties. There is nothing socialist about them.

William Shoki

I wanted to bring in an audience question: How successful has Kwame Nkrumah's daughter, Samia, been in leveraging the Nkrumah legacy? What has her impact been?

Benjamin Talton

I would credit her with resurrecting the CPP. She really helped bring Nkrumahism, his brand of African socialism, back to mainstream party politics in Ghana. She had a nice run, and she was elected to parliament in 2008. She went for party flag-bearer in 2012 and lost, and then her star began to descend. But she's very active on the ground in trying to keep the legacy of Nkrumah alive.

Sean Jacobs

I'm curious how you think about the Year of Return, the annual event where large groups of people, many celebrities, particularly from the United States, converge on Ghana around Christmas. The parties look great [laughs]. But Nkrumah was the originator of the year of return. Is this a neoliberal version, or am I being too rough on it?

Anakwa Dwamena

I'm going to roll this into the previous question about Samia. I think Samia's presence alone had a big impact in terms of the two-party system: it's either the NDC or NPP, and that's about it. But I think her presence, for the first time, was allowing people to think about issues differently. They were talking about policies rather than, "Are we going to have this guaranteed vote or this ethnicity behind us."

That is probably why the [Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a Nkrumahist organization] comes about, right? Because there's this sense that the old CPP has been complacent, and these young people break away from the CPP to become the EFF [in 2016], the same way Nkrumah, leading the youth wing of the UGCC, broke away. So, I think that whether or not she eventually becomes president or becomes politically involved in a larger sense, her presence alone is going to shift things and make us reckon with this legacy.

Similarly, whenever I talk to people from other countries, they are like, "You can't complain about Ghana. Ghana is perfect." And in a way, having people go to Ghana and see what it's like for themselves will help shake that image and will sort of help make the government and people stand up. Because I think we've been sort of riding off of "Ghana is the gateway" for a long time, and it can continue to be, but there's a lot of work to be done. So that's how I'm choosing to look at [the Year of Return].

William Shoki

How do we rearticulate Nkrumah's vision of Pan-Africanism, which went beyond this commercial brand of Pan-Africanism, about selling Africa as a product, and was really about restructuring the global order as a whole, not just for Africans, but for the entire globe — about saying that capitalism doesn't

work for anyone?

Benjamin Talton

I hate to end on a pessimistic note, but I think we have a set of leaders who are not only more concerned with their own sovereignty and integrity, but their own positions of power.

So, I think we need a new type of Pan-Africanism. We have to envision anew these relationships. If we get away from this commodification and commercialism, perhaps we can get back to the politics of it.

Nkrumah was a socialist. How alive is socialism in Africa today? I would say, "Not very." But I think we need to envision a new Pan-Africanism, and for that, I'm optimistic.