

## **Kwame Nkrumah's Pan-African Socialism**

**Kwame Nkrumah, who died on this day in 1972, was a leader in the fight against colonialism. But he knew that independence wasn't enough – only a unified, socialist Africa could truly free itself from its former masters.**



Today marks the 49th anniversary of the death of Ghana's first Prime Minister and President, Kwame Nkrumah. Nkrumah's Pan-African dream envisioned a united Africa free from neocolonial exploitation and capable of representing itself as an equal on the world stage. While these dreams sadly never came to full realisation, they continue to provide inspiration to generations of Africans and the global diaspora.

'Today, from now on, there is a new African in the world! That new African is ready to fight his own battles and show that after all, the black man is capable of managing his own affairs.' Those were the words spoken by Kwame Nkrumah on 6 March, 1957, as he announced that the former British Gold Coast had become the independent state of Ghana. It marked the first sub-Saharan nation to achieve independence from their colonial masters and inspired a wave of independence movements throughout the continent.

A committed socialist and Pan-Africanist, Nkrumah would also declare that 'our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of Africa.' The desire of Nkrumah for a united, liberated and socialist Africa grew largely out of the fifth Pan-African Congress in 1945, held in Manchester and principally organised by radical Pan-African scholar George Padmore, who would become an advisor and mentor to Nkrumah until his death in 1959.

### **Pan-African Organising**

George Padmore's politics were highly influential for Nkrumah. Padmore had been an active Communist since the 1920s, and was an early militant in black workers' struggles through the American Negro Labor Congress. Nkrumah was introduced to Padmore by another pioneering black Marxist, CLR James, whom the future Ghanaian leader had met while in America, where he first

encountered radical writers ranging from Marcus Garvey to W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois had played a key role in organising the fourth Pan-African Congress in New York in 1927. But the fifth came at a crucial historical juncture. With global empires left weakened in the aftermath of the Second World War, a movement was growing to win self-determination for the subject peoples of the world. It was one which aimed not only at breaking the chains of colonial domination, but at building new societies fundamentally free from oppression and exploitation. In the words of historian Hakim Adi, the Congress served as the radical ‘blueprint for a new Africa’, with delegates collectively issuing a challenge to the colonial powers and strongly opposing the ‘monopoly of capital and the rule of private wealth and industry for private profit alone.’ Echoing the Communist Manifesto of Marx and Engels, the Congress issued a rallying call for colonised peoples around the world: ‘Colonial and Subject Peoples of the World – Unite!’ Under Nkrumah, the newly independent Ghana (named after the title given to the ruler of the precolonial West-African *Wagadou* empire) quickly became a beacon for Pan-African solidarity and anti-colonial agitation. In the spirit of the Manchester Pan-African Congress, Accra would host the first All-African People’s Conference in 1958, attended by delegates from colonies still under imperial rule. One such notable delegate was Congolese firebrand Patrice Lumumba, who would go on to lead the Congolese National Movement (MNC) in securing independence from Belgium and establishing the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) just two years later. The culmination of both conferences was the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), principally organised by Nkrumah. While the OAU was riven with disputes and seen by many as ineffectual and bureaucratic, it was on occasion able to demonstrate the strength of African solidarity. Its finer moments have included providing military aid to Umkhonto we Sizwe during the anti-struggle and Zimbabwean militants in the battle against colonial rule in Rhodesia.

## Limits of Independence

Nkrumah understood the practical limitations of the nominal independence that was sweeping through Africa throughout the 1960s. His 1965 publication *Neocolonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism* (an homage to Vladimir Lenin’s *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*) was a scathing and prescient critique of ‘neocolonial’ practices.

In the book, Nkrumah displayed a recognition that Ghana remained heavily reliant on the former imperial powers for financial aid and investment. It provided an important contribution to African political philosophy, introducing Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory of neocolonialism to an African context and popularising the titular concept. The definition of neocolonialism is neatly summarised in the book’s introduction:

‘The essence of neo-colonialism is that the state which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.’

Nkrumah sought to remedy this economic dependency by pursuing a policy of industrialisation and modernisation of the economy. The centrepiece of this was the Volta River Project, which produced the Akosombo Dam – a vast hydroelectric facility which helped to power Ghana’s aluminium industry. But the book itself caused a stir among the Western powers. So incendiary was its publication, in fact, that it prompted a furious US State Department to withdraw millions of dollars in United States ‘Food for Peace’ aid – a then unprecedented economic reprisal.

Nkrumah’s relationship with the two global superpowers of the Cold War—the United States and the Soviet Union—greatly shaped the direction of his politics, and it is vital to understand Ghana and the emerging independent African nations within this Cold War context. With both global hegemony vying for political and economic influence in the region, Nkrumah would publicly commit to a doctrine of non-alignment, a delicate balancing act that required adept political manoeuvring. In this new age of nuclear weapons, proxy war would become the weapon of choice for both superpowers – and falling into the trap of becoming beholden to either Western or Eastern bloc was a priority if Nkrumah’s Pan-African dream was to become a reality. Nkrumah even petitioned the embattled Lumumba not to accept further Soviet aid, noting that ‘it would be a disaster for all of us in Africa’ if a proxy war was to be ignited in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Sadly for Lumumba, as for Nkrumah himself, this dynamic of superpower competition was to prove impossible to overcome.

## Legacy

Among the African diaspora today, Nkrumah is largely looked upon as a liberator. While this was certainly true for much of his leadership, the latter half of his tenure complicates this image. Facing a mounting balance of payments crisis, internal opposition, and increasing paranoia following several assassination attempts, Nkrumah would declare his Convention People's Party (CPP) the sole legal political party and himself president for life in 1964.

What followed was a series of repressive crackdowns on dissent, facilitated by the infamous Preventative Detention Act (PDA). Ghana effectively became a one-party state. Nkrumah's rising unpopularity and increasing association with the Eastern Bloc culminated in his ousting through an alleged US-UK backed military coup in 1966. In a bitter irony, the junta which replaced him cited Nkrumah's willingness to commit Ghanaian troops to African liberation struggles as a reason for deposing him as leader.

That regime would soon prove Nkrumah's thesis about the limits of independence by instituting the structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. It oversaw a campaign of privatisation of state companies which rolled back Nkrumah's achievements in the economy. Neo-colonialism was alive and well.

Nkrumah would live in exile in Guinea for the rest of his life. As a mark of respect for his achievements, that country's president Ahmed Sékou Touré made Nkrumah an honorary co-president. His paranoia concerning CIA assassination plots would only heighten in exile, and his health would slowly worsen until Nkrumah passed away in 1972.

For all his flaws, Nkrumah represents a symbol of hope for many Africans who aspire to live on a truly free continent. Although his Pan-African dream was never realised, his pursuit of a united Africa constituted a clear goal: autonomy, unity, and dignity for oppressed peoples who had been ravaged for centuries by the brutality of colonialism and imperialist resource extraction.

In this way, Nkrumah's Pan-African, socialist legacy continues to inspire us – and offer a path forward for revolutionaries in our own time.