

From Colonization to Globalization The Political and Intellectual Legacies of Kwame Nkrumah

by

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Once again, Africa is the site of political ferment and external power interference.

Recent events in the north of Africa, starting with Tunisia, then Egypt and leading to the so called “Arab-Spring” has reinforced the pivotal role this continent plays in world affairs. Yet with French troops facilitating the ousting of Laurent Gbagbo in the Ivory Coast, NATO's active role in overthrowing the Gadhafi government in Libya, the powerlessness of Africa to take its own destiny in its hands is poignantly clear.

“If we do not formulate plans for unity and take active steps to form political union, we will soon be fighting and warring among ourselves with the imperialists and colonialist standing behind the screen and pulling vicious wires, to make us cut each other's throats for the sake of their diabolical purposes in Africa.” Nkrumah in his characteristic voyeurism warned his fellow African leaders more than 50 years ago.

Sadly, 50 odd years after Nkrumah's warning, Africa remains as vulnerable to external interference and domination due to the lack of vision, bold leadership and concrete action on the part of its leaders. Yet Africa is full of promise. With much of its wealth still buried in the bowels of its earth and a growing number of young and enterprising youthful population, Africa is far from a basket case. Potentially the richest continent, all Africa needs is bold, visionary leaders of the caliber of Nkrumah to galvanize its people to take their own destiny in their own hands.

From August 19 to 21, over 120 participants from four continents, gathered at the Richmond Campus of Kwantlen Polytechnic University in British Columbia, Canada to share ideas and knowledge about the political and intellectual legacies of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah.

The conference provided an intellectual forum to debate and discuss the legacies of Nkrumah's socio-political philosophy and geo-political paradigm in the context of contemporary African and world politics, and of global diplomacy. More specifically, speakers from Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and North America debated and discussed the pros and cons of Nkrumah's pan-Africanist project, drawing parallels from different regions of the world, including Canada, Europe, the USA, and India.

Speakers also addressed critical issues facing the African continent, running the gamut from conflict prevention, governance, international development, social justice, globalization and terrorism to human rights, gender equity and youth education and empowerment.

The conference, which marked the centenary anniversary of the birth of Nkrumah, Africa's Man of the Millennium and perhaps the most famous pan-Africanist after Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois, was the most consistent was the culmination of events organized world-wide to celebrate his 100th birthday anniversary.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Charles Quist-Adade co-organizer of the first biennial Kwame Nkrumah International Conference and contributing editor of this special edition, noted that scholars of all stripes agree that peace, security, democracy, good governance, human rights, and sound economic management are pre-conditions for ending the economic marginalization of Africa. But this is where the agreement ends. Scholarship on post-colonial Africa is riveted by several interconnected discursive debates on the historical, current, and future trajectories of the continent.

He observed that the debates reflect two general politico-ideological positions: (1) the discourse of Afro-pessimism versus the discourse of Afro-optimism; and (2) the discourse of looking inward (internalist) versus the discourse of looking outward (externalist) (Bourenane, 1992). Briefly, Afro-pessimists insist that African underdevelopment is self-induced through inept, autocratic, and kleptocratic leadership, and that Western aid does more harm than good to the continent (Ayittey, 1992, 1998; Kaplan, 1994). Afro-optimists, on the other hand, argue that Africa's current parlous state is attributable to centuries of the trilogy of slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism (TSCN) (Quist-Adade, 2001), and that the West has a moral obligation to right the wrongs of the past (slavery and colonialism) and end its continuing neo-colonial policies in Africa, if the continent is to have any hope to develop.

Dr. Quist-Adade stated that the "Afro-pessimism-Afro-optimism divide" also reflects diametrically opposed positions on pan-Africanism. Afro-pessimists dismiss pan-Africanism as a chimera, a utopian pipe dream, while Afro-optimists, like Kwame Nkrumah, see in pan-Africanism the antidote to African underdevelopment (Mbeki, 1999). Between the Afro-pessimists and Afro-optimists are the Afro-realists, who temper pessimism with healthy doses of optimism (Gordon and Wolpe, 1998). While they take into account the weight of Africa's sordid colonial history and of 500 years vestiges of the TSCN, as well as the current lopsided global economic system, they also account for African agency—the creative energies of Africans to overcome at least some of their problems. Several of the papers presented at the KNIC and published in the volume reflected this divide and not only rekindled the longstanding debate but offered new and diverse insights against the backdrop of our post-Cold War, "post-racial" and globalizing world.

NKRUMAH'S CONTINUING RELEVANCE

Nkrumah was ahead of his time, a political prophet, for many of his pessimistic cautions about the fate of the African continent have proven true (Davidson, 1973). Thirty-eight years since his death, the ideas and issues that Nkrumah lived for and wrote about continue to reverberate across the continent. In his controversial book *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Nkrumah denounced the rampaging nature of multi-national companies, as well as Africa's dependency on aid, its debt and its increasing poverty in the absence of greater economic and political integration (see Biney, 2008). As Mazrui (2004) points out, Nkrumah's book, like Lenin's more famous *Imperialism: The Last Stage of Capitalism*, identified the negative side of globalization. For Nkrumah, African unity was neither the dream nor the fantasy that his detractors and enemies accused him of having. He considered African unity a precondition for the survival of Africa and Africans. In the present era of globalization, or unbridled capitalist expansion, it appears that Nkrumah's socio-political and cultural thought continues to have relevance to a new generation of scholars and African people around the world (Biney, 2008). In addition, Nkrumah: was the only world leader to attempt a peace accord with America to end the Vietnam War; was one of the most important players in the non-aligned movement; built new schools and accelerated the education system in Ghana; introduced a free healthcare delivery system as well as free, compulsory universal elementary education in Ghana; established sixty-eight new state-owned factories within a record time of nine years.

But Nkrumah also had his flaws. His one-party state democracy stifled different and divergent views from the other side of the political divide. His installation as "Life President" of his party, the Convention People's Party, made him a dictator in the eyes of many. He also did nothing to discourage party cronies from turning him into a demigod. While he did not subject his opponents to the callous, brutal repression and bloody massacres symptomatic of African dictators such as Idi Amin of Uganda and Jean-Bédel Bokassa of Central African Republic, Nkrumah did use the Preventative Detention Act (PDA) enacted by the British Colonial Administration to throw his political opponents into jail without trial. His enforcement of the PDA to crack down on his opponents, who were bent on unseating him through terrorist bombings and numerous assassination attempts, was criticized as dictatorial and draconian.

The conference was held at the confluence of the anniversaries of several monumental events in Africa, the most important one being the fiftieth anniversary of what is popularly referred to as "The Year of Africa." The year 1960 witnessed a host of events, including the end of the Mau Mau resistance in Kenya, mass riots during Charles de Gaulle's trip to Algeria, the murder of sixty-nine non-violent protestors in South Africa's Sharpeville Massacre, and independence for seventeen African nations (Biney, 2008). While the year was marked by both the entrenched brutality of European colonial rule and the birth of new African nations, there was an overwhelming sense of optimism for a vibrant, independent, and self-sufficient Africa. The year 2010 also marks the twentieth anniversary of the release of Nelson Mandela from jail, which signaled the demise of the apartheid system in South Africa. As well, the KNIC coincided with the 125th anniversary of the Berlin Conference, which partitioned Africa among the European imperial powers.

For scholars, the conference offered a unique opportunity to contextualize Nkrumah's pan-Africanist agenda within the neo-liberal global project and against the backdrop of the current global economic and political ferment.

In this special issue, we bring readers 10 of the papers presented at the conference.