

# Kwame Nkrumah

## *A Transnational Life*

Few individuals exemplify the richness and depth of the world that shaped twentieth-century Africa more than Kwame Nkrumah. At its foundation, Nkrumah's biography necessarily subverts both the intentional and unintentional constraints of what have emerged in both popular and scholarly works as two-dimensional representations of the African past. Like many of his generation, Nkrumah lived a life that spanned multiple historical and historiographical worlds. As a child and young man, Nkrumah came of age in the emerging imperial world of the early Gold Coast (colonial Ghana). Attending a Catholic primary school in the far southwestern Gold Coast town of Half Assini before gaining admission into one of the first matriculating classes at the new Achimota Secondary School just outside the Gold Coast capital of Accra, Nkrumah's early years were fundamentally marked by both the visible and the invisible changes ushered into Gold Coast life by the onset of formal

colonial rule. After Achimota, Nkrumah—through the help of the Nigerian nationalist and Accra-based newspaper editor Nnamdi Azikiwe—traveled to the United States to attend Lincoln University, a historically Black college in rural Pennsylvania. Spending approximately a decade in the United States, Nkrumah witnessed American life at the height of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Even more importantly, he confronted life and politics as a Black man in Jim Crow-era America.

In May 1945, Nkrumah again shifted historical contexts, leaving the United States just as the European war was ending. Following his arrival in London, Nkrumah committed himself to the city's Black anticolonial circles, where, working alongside the Trinidadian pan-Africanist George Padmore, he helped organize the 1945 Manchester Pan-African Congress. Famed for its call for an immediate end to European colonial rule in Africa and the Caribbean, the Manchester Congress at once resurrected a pan-African movement that—at least in its most prominent manifestations—had arguably been dormant since the 1920s, while also creating a political environment for African anticolonial nationalists like Nkrumah to explore their shared experiences, struggles, and ambitions for the continent.

Nkrumah's 1947 return to the Gold Coast ushered in another new era in his life, during which he would organize one of Africa's first mass political parties. In doing so, he and his fellow party organizers drew women,

workers, ex-servicemen, farmers, and youth, among others, to a political movement that was national in scope and was founded upon the expressed goal of “Self-Government Now.” In 1951, in the Gold Coast’s first popularly contested elections, it was these diverse groups of people who would catapult Nkrumah into his first political office as the so-called leader of government business. A year later his title was elevated to that of prime minister, a position cemented by large general-election victories in 1954 and 1956. In office, Nkrumah and his government ultimately oversaw the Gold Coast’s transition to self-rule and the 1957 creation of an independent Ghana, which would become an inspiration throughout Africa and its diaspora. Moreover, in the new Ghana, Nkrumah quickly embraced the enthusiasm created by the country’s independence, transforming pan-African manifestations of Ghana’s independence into a fundamental and, for some in Ghana, controversial part of the new Ghanaian identity he sought to inculcate in the populace.

Nkrumah’s presidency infamously came to an end in February 1966 as portions of the Ghanaian military and police overthrew him and his Convention People’s Party (CPP) government while he traveled abroad. Following the coup, Nkrumah went into exile in the Guinean capital of Conakry. At the invitation of Guinea’s first president, Sékou Touré, Nkrumah accepted the ceremonial title of co-president in Guinea—a title created to honor both Nkrumah’s role in advancing the

pan-African cause on the continent during his tenure in office in Ghana and Nkrumah's role in helping stabilize Guinea after that country's abrupt independence in 1958. However, the experience of the coup further radicalized the former Ghanaian leader as he now began to more actively argue for the legitimacy of anticolonial violence and guerilla warfare in Africa's continued fight against neocolonial exploitation in all its forms. It was this political vision that Nkrumah carried to his death in 1972.

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Debates and discussions of Nkrumah and his legacy, however, rarely center on Nkrumah alone. Rather, they have long been interwoven into Ghanaian, continental, and diasporic reflections on Ghana's and Africa's past and future. In December 1999, for instance, debates surrounding Nkrumah rose to the forefront of the Ghanaian and African political stage as the BBC World Service conducted a continent-wide poll in which the news agency asked its African listeners to vote for the continent's "Man of the Millennium." More than thirty years after his 1966 overthrow and a little more than a quarter century after his 1972 death, Kwame Nkrumah beat out the individual who many might have assumed would be the favorite for the honor, Nelson Mandela.<sup>1</sup> The historical context in which this poll took place is particularly important. Initially undertaken to commemorate the new millennium, the vote came at a



**Map 1.1.** Map of Ghana, ca. 1960. Produced by the Smith College Spatial Analysis Lab.

time when much of the world remained riveted by the recent liberation of South Africa and, particularly in the West, the idea of the “Rainbow Nation” put forward by Mandela and Desmond Tutu. Moreover, just months earlier Mandela had added to his international acclaim as he did what few African politicians had done before him—leave office voluntarily after one term. Yet for the BBC’s African listeners, Nkrumah and his legacy in both Ghana and Africa not only resonated with them more but, more importantly, also represented something different from that offered by the much-respected Mandela. For them, Nkrumah and the visions he had articulated for both Ghana and Africa in the 1950s and 1960s at once represented the still remaining vestiges of the hope and aspirations of the bygone era of African independence and—marked by his overthrow—the disappointments of that era’s demise.

The BBC’s poll results did not go unnoticed within Ghana itself. In January 2000, for instance, columnist Kwame Nsiah took issue with the vote in the *Ghanaian Chronicle*. To this end, he rejected the renewed triumphalist narrative developing around Nkrumah implicit in the BBC poll result, arguing that Nkrumah’s foremost contribution to Ghana and Africa was that he “paved the way to Africa’s corrupt politics of our time.” According to Nsiah, “His [Nkrumah’s] politics successfully destroyed almost every institution of democracy, making politics a scare for many and dirty for all.”<sup>22</sup> Over the course of the next decade and beyond, key

commentators in the Ghanaian press and blogosphere have consistently returned to the poll in their discussions of Nkrumah and Ghanaian politics more broadly, contentiously renewing often vitriolic debates over Nkrumah's complicated and even divisive legacy in the country. In doing so, these figures have integrated this seemingly simple listener poll into a longstanding process of discursive innovation in Ghana around the life, legacy, and even body of Nkrumah. At the heart of this process is thus the continuous construction and reconstruction of the image of Nkrumah—Nkrumah-as-liberator, Nkrumah-as-authoritarian, Nkrumah-as-Ghanaian, and Nkrumah-as-pan-Africanist, among others—and the integration of these images into broader debates over the state and fate of the Ghanaian nation.

The challenge for those interested in the life and legacy of Kwame Nkrumah is that, in part through the contestations over his legacy, Nkrumah has come to represent an enigma. As the BBC poll and the reaction to it illustrate, Nkrumah means many things to many different people. Moreover, what he means and to whom has changed over time and continues to change. In the 1950s and 1960s he was simultaneously viewed across Africa and significant parts of the African Diaspora as a—if not *the*—hero of African liberation and, for many in some countries, as a threat to their national autonomy as their governments accused Nkrumah and the government he led of meddling in their internal affairs. Even Mandela complained in his diary that the pan-African

anticolonial machine that Nkrumah had made famous in Ghana had “turned out to be something quite contrary to what it was meant to be.”<sup>3</sup> Others, meanwhile, insisted that it was with Nkrumah and his vision of a liberated and united Africa that Africa’s and the global Black community’s future rested.<sup>4</sup> In Ghana, as Nsiah’s response to the BBC poll indicates, similar debates occurred, for Ghanaians who lived through the heady days of the 1950s and the 1960s regularly balance stories of an ambitious, imaginative, and innovative leader with tales of an Nkrumah-led government that generated wide-ranging fears of political detention throughout the populace.<sup>5</sup>

In the decades since the 1966 coup that overthrew Nkrumah and especially his 1972 death, debates surrounding the memory and legacy of Nkrumah in Ghana and Africa alike have not waned, as the debates unleashed by the BBC poll indicate. Over the years, Nkrumah has come to represent everything from hope, joy, and African self-determination and dignity, in a global context where such things cannot be taken for granted, to, as Nsiah suggests, corruption and decline. Moreover, in contrast to the debates over Nkrumah that preceded these more contemporary reflections, posthumous debates surrounding the Ghanaian politician were only rarely about Nkrumah himself. Instead, Nkrumah—his life, experiences, and career—served as a mechanism for Ghanaians, Africans, and others to make sense of their changing relationships to and anxieties with the

continuously evolving postcolonial nation and state. Across the continent, the 1970s and 1980s in particular was a period of precarity in which not only had the dreams of the independence era given way to despair in much of the continent, but, just as importantly and with a few notable exceptions, the continent appeared to have lost its dreamers. Those who remained, like Thomas Sankara, in neighboring Burkina Faso, often suffered fates worse than Nkrumah.<sup>6</sup> In Ghana specifically, the period was foremost one of political and economic disarray marked by coups, food shortages, and uncertainty. More than just nostalgia for a past lost, the memory and image of Nkrumah thus often became a stand-in for more complex and deeper reflections on an alternative future robbed of the continent by inept and extractive politicians, neocolonial powers abroad, and, for some, the perceived apathy of their fellow Africans writ large.

By the 1990s and early 2000s, as Ghana and much of the continent ostensibly transitioned into multiparty democracies, Nkrumah again rose within the public and popular imagination. At the center of these reflections on Nkrumah were the promise and disappointments of the post-Cold War world. For many outside Africa, particularly within journalistic and certain academic circles, the end of the Cold War represented a victory for freedom and democracy as the Soviet Union and its brand of communism dissolved, purportedly transforming the Soviet Union and its various satellite states into fledgling capitalist democracies. In Africa, the euphoria

of the post-Cold War world found its most visible expression in a wave of democratic constitutional reforms in the last decade of the twentieth century. Between 1989 and 2003, for instance, all but four of sub-Saharan Africa's forty-eight states would, at a minimum, hold de jure contested elections.<sup>7</sup> Ghana itself held a referendum on a new constitution in early 1992, with the country holding its first multiparty elections in over a decade later that year. However, as elections took place throughout Africa, what could not be broken was the political elite's hold on power as, throughout much of the continent, including Ghana, the political elite responded more to the free-market fetishization of the global order than the spoken and unspoken social contracts linking it to the populace over which it governed. As a result, by the early 2000s Ghanaians, Africans, leftists, and others would regularly come to marshal Nkrumah and his political project as a response to the calcifying inequality of Africa's neoliberal age. Nkrumah, his pan-Africanism, and especially his focus on African economic self-determination stood as a shadow narrative to the claims of a "rising Africa"—mostly tied to the continent's perceived openness for business—coming from the halls of the continent's ruling parties, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, and the West more broadly.

For scholars and others interested in Nkrumah himself, midcentury Ghana, or twentieth-century Africa, the wide-ranging ways in which Nkrumah and his

legacy have been deployed over the past sixty-plus years have provided many challenges. In histories of mid-century Ghana, for instance, scholars have found it difficult to disentangle perception from reality and myth from memory in their histories. In my own previous research on Nkrumah-era Ghana, popular reflections on Nkrumah almost necessarily deviated toward normative questions over whether Nkrumah was “good” or “bad” for Ghana or if he succeeded or failed, with many also extending these Ghanaian debates to the continental level.<sup>8</sup> In Ghana, as suggested, the Manichean nature of these discussions belies the much deeper contemporary and historical undertones driving the debates. However, in the decades since Nkrumah’s overthrow scholars have tended to replicate variations of these debates in their own work on Nkrumah, often judging him by an imaginary social-scientific scorecard tied to their own expectations for the postcolonial Ghana that Nkrumah led. In perhaps the most famous example of such a form of scholarly assessment, the prominent Kenyan political scientist Ali Mazrui declared in 1966 that through Nkrumah’s role in leading the Gold Coast to its 1957 independence and subsequently his commitment to continental unity, “Nkrumah was a great Gold Coaster” and a “great African.” However, through what Mazrui saw as the “excesses” of Nkrumah’s leadership in Ghana, “Nkrumah fell short of becoming a great Ghanaian.”<sup>9</sup>

As my previous work on Nkrumah-era Ghana has argued, the shortcomings of such an approach to

understanding early postcolonial politics and life in Africa are many. At the forefront of these challenges is the question of historicization, for, as scholars, journalists, and other commentators default to these normative assessments of African politics, they tend to strip from the African political and social context its specificity. In doing so, they make impossible sustained and nuanced analyses of not only specific African historical contexts, but, just as importantly, explorations into the ways in which those contexts have changed due to the actions and reactions of a diverse array of historical actors to different local and global stimuli. In Ghana specifically, the relative dearth of archival sources on the Nkrumah era, coupled with the well-documented biases of the colonial record, have in many ways further buttressed such an approach to the twentieth-century African past, feeding both into and from the more popular public narratives surrounding Nkrumah, his life, and legacy. The result has often been a set of flattened pictures of Nkrumah, Gold Coast/Ghanaian politics, and the transnational political, social, and cultural networks that came to shape them as well as twentieth-century Africa more broadly.

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This biography thus has multiple aims. As with all biographies, it strives to provide a clear understanding of the richness and depth of its subject's life and experiences as

well as an appreciation of the complexity of the subject's memory and legacy. The breadth of Nkrumah's experiences fundamentally requires a historical lens capable of focusing on the specificities of Nkrumah's life and choices and one that zooms out to position Nkrumah as part of a rotating array of interrelated historical contexts. For academic historians in particular, such a perspective has proved particularly challenging as they have largely operated in a historical discipline that has, for all intents and purposes, divided itself along temporal and geographical lines. For those interested in figures like Nkrumah, then, not only have they had to grapple with the many historical contexts that comprised the lives of Nkrumah and many of his contemporaries, but they have also been forced to confront the distinct historiographical traditions and perspectives of those varying contexts—historiographies that only rarely speak to one another directly.

As discussed earlier, at the popular level, the varied nature of Nkrumah's experiences inside and outside of Ghana has helped to create the context in which diverse groups of peoples have had the opportunity to construct their own sets of "Nkrumahs." The overarching narrative surrounding these varied "Nkrumahs" may lead them to bear similarities to one another. Many, for instance, rely on the popular trope in African history of the "big man," tying Nkrumah and his legacy to what could be read as highly masculinist interpretations of what Ghana and/or Africa could be or could have been.

Moreover, Nkrumah himself often traded in such masculinist personal and national imagery in a variety of venues, including in his 1957 autobiography.<sup>10</sup> Others, including the CPP and those opposed to Nkrumah and his party, would at various times also turn to such narrative construction. However, in building these narratives, different features of Nkrumah's life, choices, and experiences tend to be stressed. Even more importantly, the political and moral lessons one is to take from Nkrumah's biography not only shift with the unique political, social, and cultural concerns of the ones reconstructing Nkrumah's life story, but also with the changing historical circumstances. Rather, like the narrative of the Ghanaian nation more broadly, the narrative of Nkrumah's life in the Ghanaian, African, and global popular imagination is a moving target that itself requires its own historicization and contextualization.

At the center of any biography of Nkrumah, then, is the question of how to bring the various images of Nkrumah into dialogue with one another. The task, however, is not one of mere acknowledgment or narration. It is also not one limited to Nkrumah himself. In both life and legacy, Nkrumah is a figure that embodies the rapidly changing, if not chaotic, nature of the long twentieth century. In the Gold Coast/Ghana, like much of Africa, the first decades of the twentieth century marked the maturation of the modern colonial project, while the middle decades represented its demise and the final decades the growing disillusionment

with both the legacies of decolonization and the African status quo. However, as Nkrumah himself in the first three-quarters of the century and his memory after that encountered these changing historical moments, new forms of networks (regional, national, imperial, and transnational) were created to sustain themselves. For Nkrumah in his life, such network building was foremost embodied in the continuously growing list of peoples, institutions, and ideas he strove to bring into his orbit. As I have previously argued in regard to his political philosophy, “Nkrumahism,” the eclectic nature of the ideas that came together to compose his political and social thought makes it difficult to properly define Nkrumahism with much precision, particularly in a philosophical sense. Moreover, Nkrumahism also meant different things to different people, and what it meant even to Nkrumah changed in important ways over time.<sup>11</sup>

This eclecticism was a feature of Nkrumah’s life as well. Even more importantly, it is in this diversity and, in some cases, also in the internal tensions and contradictions that that diversity brought on that make Nkrumah’s life and worldview so politically and intellectually rewarding. Perhaps more than any other figure in twentieth-century Africa, he and his philosophy embodied a politics of bricolage: a politics that sought to bring people together by building and experimenting with new forms of political, social, cultural, and economic connection. As noted, for some a sense

of excitement and hope pervaded Nkrumah's political, social, and cultural experimentation. Looking to him personally, some saw in him a cosmopolitanism that, in Ghana, promised to transform the country into the epicenter of the new Africa, while in Africa and in the diaspora he opened spaces for new imaginings of an envisioned global Black community that would claim a powerful and equal voice on the international stage. Others, disillusioned by the often draconian methods Nkrumah and his government employed in their attempts to make their vision a reality, feared what could be lost in this transition, and as they opposed Nkrumah's policies, many also increasingly feared for their own safety.

To this end, the goals of this biography do differ from that of a simple narration of Nkrumah's life story. In addition to the more traditional biographical structure, this book views Nkrumah's life story itself as an arena of contestation that must be historicized in dialogue with the more conventional biographical narrative. To many in Ghana specifically, the hopes, dreams, anxieties, and fears aroused by the Nkrumah era and Nkrumah himself did not disappear with Nkrumah's 1966 ouster—or even his death. Rather, for many, they are very much still alive, articulating themselves in nuanced and often hidden and unexpected ways in the many intertwined historical contexts—colonial, imperial, national, continental, and transnational—that have come together to comprise Ghanaian life and politics.

In other words, Nkrumah has an equally important afterlife that is intimately interwoven throughout both popular and scholarly understandings of his more classical biography. Thus, I contend that such a reframing of Nkrumah's life story in this biography refocuses the historical narrative by presenting Nkrumah as both the subject of the biography and as a lens into asking broader questions surrounding the political and social changes marking twentieth-century Africa. What arises, then, through a reflection on Ghanaians', Africans', and others' invocations of Nkrumah is a recognition of the process of negotiation between past and present that continuously drives Ghanaians' and others' wide-ranging debates over the "nation" in its many different meanings.

As a result, in addition to this introductory chapter, six additional chapters comprise this biography. The book's second chapter traces Nkrumah's childhood and young adulthood in the Gold Coast. Born in the far-western Gold Coast town of Nkroful, Nkrumah came of age in a period in the Gold Coast in which the formal colonial stage was coalescing. Transitioning from its late-nineteenth-century creation into a more professionalized governmental administration, the colonial state of Nkrumah's youth was at once becoming increasingly bureaucratic and, despite its rhetoric of indirect rule, expanding its reach—wittingly and unwittingly—into new aspects of Gold Coast life. As a result of this transition, as the chapter discusses,

it helped catalyze a shift in how wide segments of the Gold Coast populace understood the political and social world around them and the opportunities that world could afford. For Nkrumah and his family, like many others, education became key in this new world, for education had the potential of opening new networks of opportunity and engagement—intellectual, professional, and political—for those lucky enough to go to school and particularly for the select few, like Nkrumah, who made it to the colony's premier secondary schools.

The book's third chapter details Nkrumah's experiences in the United States and Great Britain. Comprising more than a decade of his life (1935–47), this period marked not only his self-described political awakening, but, just as importantly, the broadening of his worldview as he explored and experimented with a range of political philosophies and activist networks that at times even transcended both diasporic and continental politics. As a number of scholars have shown, it was during this time that Nkrumah's political and social thought began to take shape and mature. However, this chapter goes beyond such an appraisal by emphasizing the changing diasporic and global political contexts that marked Nkrumah's time abroad and his emerging politics. These included the Depression-era and wartime United States, American racial politics, and the anticolonial and pan-African politics of the postwar United Kingdom.

The book's fourth and fifth chapters interrogate Nkrumah's 1947 return to the Gold Coast and his rise on

the Gold Coast/Ghanaian political scene. These chapters distinguish themselves from the largely chronological framework of other biographies of Nkrumah's tenure on the Gold Coast/Ghanaian political stage, most of which constrain themselves to the detailing of Nkrumah's elevation from an anticolonial agitator to prime minister and finally, in 1960, to president. In contrast, the chapters emphasize the broader tension in Nkrumah's politics and thought as he sought to balance the structural constraints of territorially defined nationalist mobilization with his own and others' pan-African ambitions for Ghana, the continent, and the global Black community. In doing so, the chapters highlight the wide-ranging era of political experimentation that marked Nkrumah's time in office. Not only was this a time for defining the political and social parameters of the new Ghanaian nation, but it was also one of redefining Africa in the emerging international community.

The book's sixth chapter examines Nkrumah's life in exile following the 1966 coup that overthrew him. The general perception of this time in Nkrumah's life was one of an exiled ex-president plotting fruitlessly to make his return to Ghana as part of a counter coup. Nkrumah did spend much of his time making such plans. However, as the chapter details, this period was also a time in which Nkrumah actively began to rethink his postcolonial vision for Ghana and Africa, further radicalizing himself and his political philosophy as he confronted a continental and global political reality that, to his mind, had fully

succumbed to the dangers of neocolonialism. As a result, the development of his political philosophy in exile reflects a much more sustained engagement with ideas of anti-imperial violence, guerilla warfare, and class struggle in the politics and praxis of African liberation.

The book's final chapter provides the space for continuing reflections on the many conflicting legacies of Nkrumah as a thinker, anticolonial activist, and political leader in Ghana, Africa, and the African Diaspora. The chapter opens with the reactions to Nkrumah's 1972 death and the controversies surrounding who had rights to his body—his exiled home of Guinea, the town of Nkroful, or the Ghanaian state—thus setting the stage for many of the subsequent contestations over his legacy that have marked his postmortem history. As this biography as a whole illustrates, Nkrumah is a figure who has been resurrected many times in the nearly four decades since his death. For many Ghanaians living in the aftermath of decolonization's disappointments, structural adjustment's dismantling of the infrastructure of the postcolonial state, and the ever-widening inequalities of neoliberal multiparty democracy, the prospect of an Nkrumah now among the ancestors continues to embed itself in deep-seated battles over the future of the Ghanaian nation. Meanwhile, continentally and in the diaspora, Nkrumah at once continues to represent the hope of a shared pan-African future and the constraints to that future created by the continuing power of global capitalism and imperialism.