BOOK REVIEW


Living with Nkrumahism makes an original contribution to the scholarship on Kwame Nkrumah and the effect of his ideology on the Ghanaian citizenry. The book’s main argument is that, although Kwame Nkrumah’s radical ideology remained constant between 1957 and 1966, the policies of his Convention People’s Party (CPP) shifted in response to global processes that threatened Nkrumah’s anticolonial and Pan-Africanist vision. The shifting political terrain forced Ghanaians to adapt continuously to “evolving political realities” marked by the gradual “tightening of control by the state” (210). In Jeffrey Ahlman’s opinion, these reactions represent the most important ‘edifice and legacy’ of Ghana’s transition to self-rule (210-11).

Ahlman’s analysis begins with a summary of Nkrumah’s visions of decolonization and nation building/national development (Chapters 1–2), and then proceeds to discuss the CPP’s attempts to build a new national consciousness at a grassroots level. Chapter One presents the transnational character of Nkrumah’s radical anti-colonialist vision, focusing on his intellectual influences rather than offering a standard biography. There is nothing surprising here, but I wish that Ahlman had delved further into Nkrumah’s radicalism while abroad in the United States and United Kingdom. Chapter Two lays out Nkrumah’s vision of decolonization and national development, focusing on ideologically-based education and modernization. Regarding the latter, Ahlman reveals Nkrumah’s brutality toward the old order through the story of Tema, a fishing village destroyed by the CPP to make way for a modern harbor. Ahlman uses ethnic (Ga) resistance to highlight the ethnic and religious character of resistance to Nkrumah’s modernist project.

Chapter Three surveys Nkrumah’s attempt to remake the Ghanaian citizenry by capturing the youth for the CPP’s nationalist project. Focusing on two youth organizations, the Builders’ Brigade and the Young Pioneers, Ahlman argues convincingly that Nkrumah desired to sever Ghana’s youth from the old ties of family and tradition and turn them into loyal socialist citizens. There is much to ponder in this chapter, but I especially liked the tension that came through in Ahlman’s interviews, between the experience of social disruption (similar to the physical disruption in Tema) and the willing participation of young Ghanaians in the organizations as a means of social mobility. Chapter
Four focuses on work and productivity, arguing that for Nkrumah, work constituted a moral act of willing self-sacrifice undertaken for the good of the collective. This project triggered labor resistance, which culminated in a general strike in 1961 that prompted the CPP to absorb labor into the state.

Chapters 5 and 6 cover the post-1961 period. Chapter 6 presents a gendered analysis of the impact of the CPP’s clampdown on labor, arguing that the Party began to see women as too weak, “talkative” and “distracted” to contribute to the revolution (170). Once lauded as equal to male workers, in the 1960s the CPP increasingly saw women as threats to the revolution. Interestingly, Ahlman reaches this conclusion by focusing on the daily work lives of women at the Bureau of African Affairs, the main propaganda arm of the CPP. By examining personnel records, for example, Ahlman illuminates discriminatory practices by male managers towards maternity leaves and sick days taken by women employees. Chapter 6 examines how Ghanaians dealt with the tightening of state power during the descent into one-party authoritarianism between 1961 and 1964. Ahlman rightly characterizes this period as one of great disruption, during which many Ghanaians chose to accommodate themselves—believing that authoritarian rule might be permanent. To make this case, Ahlman again draws evidence from the Bureau of African Affairs, showing that (for instance) staff often tied requests for higher pay or promotions to the collective good of Nkrumahism. He also argues that proclaiming loyalty to the CPP reflected the perceived need of many Ghanaians to forge new networks of belonging as their old worlds crumbled before them. With respect to the Bureau, the evidence for this claim is rather thin, but it is insightful nonetheless. The chapter is on firmer ground in the next section, which uses the CPP’s security files and official publications to discuss the state’s devastating attacks on individuals and even entire towns who opposed Nkrumah’s one-party state. While some Ghanaians continued to resist, many—including several of Ahlman’s interviewees—saw no alternative but to accommodate themselves to the Nkrumahist state. Little did they know that Nkrumahism would fall to a military coup in 1966.

To sum up, Living with Nkrumahism is an ambitious and successful book. It should be read by anyone interested in Nkrumah’s Ghana and African national development in the 1950s and 1960s.

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