



Kwame Nkrumah and the Quest for Independence¹

Depending on whether you looked from the North Atlantic or the Black Atlantic, the year 1957 appeared to signal two different political futures. On 6 March, Ghana finally secured its independence from Great Britain after a decade-long nationalist struggle. At the independence celebrations, Kwame Nkrumah, the leader of the Convention People's Party and the new prime minister, declared that Ghanaian independence marked the birth of a new African 'ready to fight his own battles and show that after all, the black man is capable of managing his own affairs' (Nkrumah 1957: 107). Less than three weeks later, on 25 March, Belgium, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands signed the Treaty of Rome, creating the European Economic Community (EEC). For the West German chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, the treaty was one more step in 'the great work of fostering durable international reconciliation and a community of nations for the good of Europe' (Vogel and Buchstab 2007). While Ghanaian independence marked the emergence of a world of nation-states from the ashes of European imperialism, the birth of the EEC in the empire's metropolises looked forward to the transcendence of the nation-state itself.

Over half a century later, we continue to operate within the terms of this opposition. As

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new nationalist movements, this time in the North Atlantic, have repudiated internationalist institutions like the European Union, their critics reject calls for independence and autonomy as fantastical and dangerous. Such a view assumes that nationalism and internationalism are incompatible. Yet if we return to Ghana in 1957 and trace Nkrumah's vision of decolonisation, we find a view of national independence that could only be realised through internationalism.

In the early days of independence, Nkrumah insisted that African states had to unite in a regional federation to overcome economic dependence and international hierarchy. Emerging concurrently with the EU, this account of regionalism was distinctively postcolonial. Rather than taming the sovereign state through regional economic linkages, Nkrumah's Pan-African federation sought to realise the nation-state's promise of independence.

Securing 'complete independence'

Born in 1909 as a subject of the British Empire in the Gold Coast colony, Nkrumah had circled the

Atlantic world as a student, worker, intellectual and political organiser before he returned to lead the nationalist movement in 1947. When Ghanaian independence was finally achieved, Nkrumah warned that the fight was just beginning. Ghanaian independence, he insisted, 'is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent' (Nkrumah 1957: 107). In seeking this liberation, Nkrumah urged fellow African nationalists to follow the Ghanaian example and 'seek ye first the political kingdom' and secure 'complete independence and sovereignty' (Nkrumah 1957: 107).

Then and now, this nationalist aspiration for complete independence inspires scepticism, suspicion, even disdain. Writing in 1960, Elie Kedourie, the British historian of the Middle East, voiced his fear that this nationalist demand would only produce postcolonial domination. He and other observers of decolonisation worried that colonial elites had grafted the nation-state onto African and Asian societies without the necessary sociological prerequisites: literacy, a middle class and strong political institutions. Nationalism was, in Kedourie's account, an alien, European ideology that elites mobilised to 'sway and dominate' the unready masses. The result in postcolonial societies would be new forms of Oriental despotism (Kedourie 1960: 112). 'Nationalism and liberalism far from being twins are really antagonistic principles',

he wrote (Kedourie 1960: 109). Kedourie's early critique of anticolonial nationalism lives on today in the preoccupation with the insularity, parochialism and anti-cosmopolitanism of nationalist projects. At best, national independence is a naïve aspiration in the context of globalisation. At worst, nationalism is a violent force that undermines transnational solidarities and institutions.

For Nkrumah, nothing could have been further from the truth. When he argued that Ghana's independence must be linked to the fate of colonised Africa, he did not just mean that the rest of the continent had to emerge from alien rule by replicating the nation-state form. Instead, he imagined new political and economic links that would create a United States of Africa. The 1960 republican Constitution of Ghana looked forward to this achievement. At Nkrumah's insistence, it included a clause that conferred on the Parliament 'the power to provide for the surrender of the whole or any part of the sovereignty of Ghana' once a Union of African States was formed. Guinea and Mali followed Ghana's lead and adopted similar clauses in their Constitutions. The three states formed the Ghana-Guinea-Mali Union, which was to serve as the nucleus for a future continent-wide union. The postcolonial political kingdom was not the nation-state but a Pan-African federation.

Decolonisation, Nkrumah argued, had become a word 'much and unctuously used ... to describe the transfer of political control from colonialist to African sovereignty' (Nkrumah 1965: 31). Focusing on this transfer assumed that the primary injustice of imperialism was the denial of sovereignty to

colonised peoples. For Nkrumah, however, alien rule was only one component of a larger experience of colonial dependence and dependence was first and foremost an economic relation. 'Imperialism knows no law beyond its own interests', Nkrumah wrote in 1947 (Nkrumah [1947] 1962: 33). And this interest was to transform the colonial sphere into an appendage of the metropolitan economy—a site for the production of raw materials, the exploitation of non-white workers and the sale of European goods to a captive market. The forced integration of the colony into global circuits of trade, production and consumption generated a distorted colonial economy directed by foreign interests. Even after independence, he acknowledged that these form of economic dependence and domination persisted.

Economic dependence structured the social and political conditions of the colony. A people 'long subjected to foreign domination', Nkrumah observed, becomes habituated to dependence (Nkrumah 1970: 50). Echoing Frantz Fanon's better-known theories of colonial domination, Nkrumah highlighted the psychic dimensions of colonialism. 'Under arbitrary rule, people are apt to become lethargic; their senses are dulled. Fear becomes the dominant force in their lives; fear of breaking the law, fear of the punitive measures which might result from an unsuccessful attempt to break loose from their shackles' (Nkrumah 1970: 50).

From the international economy to the everyday experiences of the colonial subject, colonial rule operated around interlocked structures of domination. As such, the demand for 'Independence

means much more than merely being free to fly our own flag and to play our own national anthem,' Nkrumah argued (Nkrumah 1967: 55). Independence required a 'revolutionary framework', enacted both nationally and internationally. Domestically, he emphasised the need to institutionalise postcolonial citizenship and democratic self-government. Starting with non-violent mass movements for independence—what Nkrumah called 'positive action'—colonial subjects were to overcome the psychic and social forms of dependence through political practice. While he insisted that the postcolonial state would be a parliamentary democracy, postcolonial citizenship went beyond elections and representation. As Jeffrey Ahlman's recent book, *Living with Nkrumahism*, illustrates, Ghanaian citizenship was a pedagogic practice that instilled the habits of independence through involvement in institutions like the Builder's Brigade, Young Pioneers and trade unions. Youth and workers were enrolled ideologically in the project of nation-building in these organisations. Citizens would learn, practise and perform 'civic duty and responsibility' as well as 'patriotism and loyalty for the country' (Ahlman 2017: 84–148). Nationalism, following this view, was not a backward-looking project that relied on pre-existing ties of language or kinship. Instead, Nkrumah acknowledged the arbitrariness of colonial boundaries and saw Ghanaian national identity as an inventive project, still in the process of collective construction.

Central to the nationalist project of postcolonial citizenship was a developmental and welfarist state that would restructure the national economy to ensure equality. 'The major advantage which

our independence has bestowed upon us is the liberty to arrange our national life according to the interests of our people and along with it, the freedom, in conjunction with other countries, to interfere with the play of [market] forces,' argued Nkrumah (Nkrumah 1970: 110). An interventionist state, as Nkrumah quoted Gunnar Myrdal, could 'alter considerably the direction of the market processes' that had produced dependence (Nkrumah 1970: 109–110). As with developmental states around the world in this period, Nkrumah's economic policy centered on modernising agriculture, investing in industrialisation and providing key social services, including universal education and healthcare.

But the postcolonial state was still trapped between *de jure* political independence and *de facto* economic dependence. For Ghana, reliance on the export of a single cash crop, cocoa, to finance development projects, exemplified this entrapment. International prices for products like cocoa fluctuated wildly, leaving the Ghanaian state vulnerable to global markets and unable to fund its national economic programme. International financing and aid, which also supported development projects, only exacerbated the externally oriented character of the postcolonial state.

Neocolonialism and economic dependence

Nkrumah's famous neologism—neocolonialism—diagnosed this persistence of economic dependence. Imperialism, he argued, had reinvented itself, adjusting to the 'loss of direct political control' by 'retain[ing] and extend[ing] its economic grip' (Nkrumah 1965: 33). From former imperial powers to international

financial institutions, external actors played a dominant role in securing the postcolonial state's budgets, shoring up its financial systems and providing the markets for its primary goods. These actors could use their outsized economic power to shape domestic policy.

In his 1965 book, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Nkrumah detailed the concessions and privileges former colonial powers demanded as part of the transfer of sovereignty: 'setting up military bases or stationing troops in former colonies and the supplying of "advisers" of one sort or another', demanding 'land concessions, prospecting rights for minerals and/or oil; the "right" to collect customs, to carry out administration, to issue paper money; to be exempt from customs duties and/or taxes for expatriate enterprises; and, above all, the "right" to provide "aid"' (Nkrumah 1965: 239–255). The result was a distorted form of postcolonial sovereignty where the elected representatives of the postcolonial state 'derive their authority to govern, not from the will of the people, but from the support which they obtain from their neocolonial masters'.

A Pan-African federation

If the nation-state had failed to overcome the problem of colonial dependence, if sovereignty could not shield new states from external compulsion, then the postcolonial political kingdom had to be reimagined. Nkrumah's vision of a Pan-African federation was an effort to do just that. A federation of African states would overcome colonial dependence by constituting a larger regional market and enhancing the capacity for regional development. Through economic integration, African states would create an African common market.

Organised on the continental scale, African states could forego their dependence on international markets and reorient their economic relationships towards other African states. Having broken the political and economic boundaries' that separated them, African states could eliminate competition among them and collectively achieve a purchasing and bargaining power to rival other regions and international powers (Nkrumah 1970: 162–163).

A Pan-African federation was not simply a free-trade area or a customs union. Instead, the linkages between new African states would need to be invented. As Nkrumah often noted, given the character of colonial dependence, African states were more connected to international markets than to each other. Railways led from the resource-rich interiors to the ports in order to facilitate extraction. Telephone lines and postal services were routed through Europe. Nkrumah argued that a federal state organised at the continental level with equal representation for all member states could gradually transform these conditions. A political federation with powers to levy taxes, raise loans and engage in economic planning could establish infrastructural connections and diversify the regional economy. A strong federal centre would also ensure that the economic integration was egalitarian. In the absence of federal redistributive mechanisms, Nkrumah's government concluded, 'There is a real danger of existing urban and proto-industrial sectors capturing all the gains', recreating dependent relations among the union's members.²

Nkrumah led the fight for this model of a Pan-African federation until he was deposed from office in a 1966 coup. By 1963, however,

the debate had shifted decisively against his project. A majority of states backed a weaker model of integration—the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).

National independence and internationalism working together

The failure of Nkrumah's programme might be taken to confirm that projects of nationalism and internationalism are ultimately incompatible. Yet the debates leading up to the formation of the OAU also began from the view that under existing economic dependence 'the emergence from colonialism is but illusory'.³ Unity, they argued, 'is the accepted goal', but they offered competing conceptions of the precise combination of integration and independence. Today the dream of Pan-Africanism persists under the auspices of the African Union, which has begun the process of constituting a continental free-trade agreement as part of Agenda 2063. Before signing that agreement on behalf of the continent's second-largest economy, South African president Cyril Ramaphosa echoed Nkrumah, noting that 'by trading among ourselves, we are able to retain more resources in the continent'.

Nkrumah's commitment to developmentalism and economic planning are tied to his mid-twentieth-century context, but recovering the internationalism of anticolonial nationalism can help us navigate the impasses of our contemporary moment. In his vision of decolonisation, national independence had to be secured against a backdrop of imperial entanglements that generated hierarchy and dependence. To imagine you could entirely

escape those entanglements was, Nkrumah argued, a kind of 'blind nationalism'. The contemporary crisis of neoliberal globalisation has birthed its own versions of blind nationalism. On the left, German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck and others defend a model of the democratic nation-state against the EU. On the right too, the fantasy of a national sovereignty unmoored from international law and institutions persists in the authoritarian populism sweeping across the global North.

Against this effort to cordon off the nation, Nkrumah insisted that international co-operation and regional federation were mechanisms for securing national independence. At the same time, he refused to reject national solidarity—the basis of 'political unity'. It helped to give form to the collective 'self' in self-determination. And it could do so without appealing to a distant past, but rather through the shared work of overcoming colonial domination and founding the postcolonial state. The problem was not the aspiration for national independence as such but that the institutional form of nation-state appeared ill-suited to secure that aim.

Those committed today to internationalism tend to see nationalist claims as insular, exclusionary and frequently violent. But the age of decolonisation reminds us that nationalism was also a vehicle for demanding democracy and international equality. Anticolonial nationalisms were not elite ideologies, as Elie Kedourie concluded, but mass movements that sought to overcome the layered structures of colonial domination.

These insights about the imbrication of the domestic and international as

well as the necessary relationship between national independence and internationalism emerged from the global circuits that anticolonial nationalists inhabited. Nkrumah's formative years were spent in the United States and the United Kingdom. In these metropolises of imperial power, Nkrumah, like many other nationalists, cultivated subaltern internationalist networks. He studied at the historically black Lincoln University, following a path that Nigerian nationalist Nnamdi Azikiwe had already travelled. During his student days, he joined black internationalist organisations like Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. Tracing the long history of black seamen, he worked on a shipping line between the United States and Mexico. When he travelled to London, he helped to organise the Fifth Pan-African Congress with the Trinidadian Marxist George Padmore.

Nkrumah's nationalism emerged from these global and subaltern networks. These same networks also shaped the administration and political programme of the nascent postcolonial state. When Nkrumah became prime minister, Padmore served as his adviser of African affairs, while another West Indian, the St Lucian economist W. Arthur Lewis, took the post of economic adviser. W.E.B. and Shirley Graham Du Bois arrived shortly after independence as guests of Nkrumah. Accra became a black cosmopolis, hosting nationalists and freedom fighters from across the continent. Ghanaian nationalism, born out of black internationalism, became home to that internationalist project. Ghanaian policy also borrowed and adapted from global repertoires of nation-building. Programmes like the Young Pioneers and Builder's

Brigade were not home-grown and particularistic projects, but drawn from models used in places that ranged from Israel to the Communist bloc.

These global circuits that help constitute nationalist projects are not distinctive to anticolonial nationalism. Contemporary right-wing nationalisms deploy and inhabit their own transnational circuits—from the deadly vigilante violence in Charleston and Christchurch, to the lobbying efforts of white South African farmers.

The point then is not to recover a ‘good’ nationalism that is sufficiently or appropriately internationalist and cosmopolitan. Neither left nor right has a monopoly on internationalism. Moreover, Nkrumah’s project, like anticolonial nationalism more broadly, was riven by its own contradictions. The conception of citizenship as ongoing political practice tied Ghanaians to the state and the Convention People’s Party, closing the space for individual freedoms and reproducing the alienation it was meant to overcome. Moreover, Nkrumah’s internationalist vision vacillated between a defence of national sovereignty in the United Nations and the delegation of sovereignty to a regional federation. Whether and how these positions might be reconciled was never addressed. As a result, the failure of the Pan-African federation culminated in the entrenchment of state sovereignty within the OAU.

Rather than search for a good nationalism, we need to pose the question of the value of the nation in historical context. The answers depend in part on the international background against which the national drama plays out. Even the most autarkic nationalists have to

consider the external conditions required to make their project possible. There are no true hermit kingdoms and there is no meaningful choice to make between nationalism or internationalism as such. The question is how those interested in human emancipation may work within the nation-state to undo the global hierarchy of nation-states—to achieve an internationalist solidarity from the specific ground upon which we stand and to oppose the reactionary internationalism that our antagonists embody. Nkrumah saw the world in the questions Ghana faced; we must do no less.

Notes

1. This essay is republished from Dissent, a magazine based in the United States. It is drawn from Adom Getachew, 2019, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
2. Union Government Is Essential to Economic Independence and Higher Living Standards, in Files of Ex-Presidential Affairs, Folder RG/17/2/1047 OAU Papers, Public Records and Archives Administration Departments, Accra, Ghana.
3. Address by His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I at the Conference of Independent African States, June 16, 1960, Bureau of African Affairs Papers, Box 483 Conference on Independent African States, George Padmore Research Library on African Affairs, Accra, Ghana.

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Recommended Additional Readings

- Cooper, F., 2014, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fejzula, M., 2020, The Cosmopolitan Historiography of Twentieth-Century Federalism, *The Historical Journal*, 14 July, pp. 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X2000025>.
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