

Re-discovering Kwame Nkrumah

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, SEP 28 2009

The recent centenary of the birth of Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana, passed without murmur in this little corner of the continent. Why this happened has both puzzled and, yes, hurt me a little. Whatever one thinks of the demons that drove the later years of Nkrumah's leadership of Ghana, he was an inspiring figure in liberation circles.

I first heard about Nkrumah from my Grade Seven History teacher, a remarkable Afrikaans woman known by the nickname, "Ma Marais". Thirteen years into apartheid, she inspired a class of white, English-speaking South Africans into thinking about the liberation of the continent by, amongst other techniques, placing photos of black liberation heroes on the walls of the classroom. Today, I doubt whether there is a single teacher in this country who would have a picture of Nkrumah up in a class-room.

This is a shame. For all the illustrious names in post-Colonial Africa, the continent remains in need of thinkers in international relations.

Nkrumah was born into a petit-bourgeoisie family in the British colony of the Gold Coast and was educated by Catholic missionaries. After an early career in school teaching he left for the US to study in Pennsylvania, first at Lincoln and later at Penn U where he read Sociology. In the mid-1940s, he was a student at the LSE but mostly devoted his energies to the Pan Africanist movement which was centred in London. He returned home in 1947 to a career in politics. Three years later, he was imprisoned by the British colonial authorities; defying the odds from prison, he led the Convention People's Party to victory and was released to become leader of the Colonial parliament; two years later he was Prime Minister and, in March, 1957, became the first Prime Minister of the independent Ghana. In 1960, when Ghana became a Republic, he was the first President.

Successively as Prime Minister and, later, President of Ghana, Nkrumah's interest in education never flagged. He was a great champion of African freedom charging Ghanaians to devote their lives to the twin callings of education and African emancipation. Sadly, however, increasingly consumed by political ambitions – most, alas, of his own making – Nkrumah lost his way and while visiting North Vietnam in 1966, he was unseated in a coup. He went into exile in Guinea where that country's president, Sekou Toure, appointed him the nominal position of co-president. Six years later, in 1972, Kwame Nkrumah died of cancer in Bucharest, Romania, in 1972.

Despite his terrible political blunders, especially the idea of One-Party democracy, in his writing and in his actions, Kwame Nkrumah set out a vision for both this continent and for the idea of freedom. It is certainly so that his record as a state-builder was mixed. It is nevertheless true that many of his dreams for Ghana and the continent were thwarted by the rise and intensity of the Cold War and the terrible uncertainty that followed in the twenty years since the Berlin Wall came down.

Much of Nkrumah's writing has been reduced to his famous phrase "seek he first the political kingdom and all things will be added to it", but this hides a literature – although polemical – which sought to understand the predatory nature of capitalism and provide a normative view of Africa's future. The former is certainly written in the dated key of socialism although the latter offers insights into the stumbling blocs in efforts to unite the continent.

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Notwithstanding the passage of time, some of Nkrumah's writing remains authoritative: his definition of 'neocolonialism' remains the standard definition, for example. Here it is from his 1965 book, *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*, "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".

He wrote on a number of international issues including the nuclear question, the Middle East, the situation in the Congo and the need for an African peace-keeping capacity.

If I raised Kwame Nkrumah's name at a gathering of IR specialists, I wonder how many so-called specialists would know who I was talking about?

Isn't it time IR devoted itself to considering the work of forgotten voices in the global periphery.

About the author:

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