

Ahlman, Jeffrey S. *Kwame Nkrumah: Visions of Liberation*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2021. 218 pages. Paperback, \$16.95

Is it possible to imagine Africa not shackled with structural adjustment programs and its youth not willingly embarking on hazardous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea? Jeffery S. Ahlman's answer in his biography of Kwame Nkrumah is an implicit but emphatic 'yes.' The debilitating conditions in which Africa has been subjected could have been easily avoided if Nkrumah's visions of liberation had been implemented. What is particularly inviting about Ahlman's work is that it is not a treatise that is overly regretful. Nor does it claim to have succeeded in establishing the last word on the man. Ahlman succeeds in keeping the questions on Nkrumah open.

Ahlman resurrects a genuine African leader's life whose destiny was to seek the materialization of Africa's engaging liberation despite the adversarial climate. The reader finds what Africa lost when Nkrumah's vision was reversed as a result of the February coup of 1966. Mounting that coup and several others across the continent set the stage for practically taking over the economies of the presumably decolonized territories. Reading Ahlman's contribution facilitates the realization that post-coloniality has been a misnomer as it covers a nuanced type of conquest (not just exploitation) that differs from colonialism. The new conquest has disparaged large populations, keeping them impoverished to the bone. Placing a stooge in a leading position achieves the reversal of independence as most African polities can claim to be politically independent yet, deep down, remain economically subservient.

The book consists of seven chapters. The first, "Kwame Nkrumah: A Transnational Life," explains why another biography on Nkrumah is needed. It reconciles the contradictory perspectives vis-a-vis the leader. Understandably, Nkrumah upset several people. His pan-African outlook was accused by both the narrow nationalistic ideology and international

capitalism as dangerous and fatalistic. Non-Ghanian nationalists and even iconic African leaders such as Nelson Mandela find Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism too restrictive. Ahlman similarly assesses Nkrumah's policies and finds a lot of eclecticism, which he dubs "the politics of bricolage" (p. 27). Nkrumah's radicalism did not emerge until it was far too late (literally in exile) when he became convinced of the necessity of the class struggle.

Chapter Two, "Empire and a Colonial Youth," traces Nkrumah's childhood and youth. It finds that the future leader's beginnings were far from smooth. Ahlman notes how Nkrumah developed an awareness of the world when the colonial government became filled with professionals and educated administrators. It was a period where cash crops revolutionized the economy of the small colony and set the stage for extractive policies that branded the continent during the postcolonial period. Similarly, Nkrumah was educated in a system that aimed to produce future managers and native administrators serving the colonial order, certainly not thinkers who would seek to upset or even question that order. That colonial system instilled in Gold Coaster values such as "...the dignity of labor and the connection between the spirit and the soil that that labor was to help cultivate" (p. 54).

Chapter Three, "Diasporic Connections and Anticolonial Experimentation," specifies Nkrumah's experience in the United States and Great Britain and the broadening of his perspectives. Understandably, Nkrumah became aware of political philosophies and was introduced to activist networks during this period. Nkrumah arrived in America during periods of Jim Crow, depression, and wartime. Lincoln University introduced him to the thinking of Garvey, Hegel, Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mazzini, among others. It was there that the accumulative nature of capital and the endless hunt for profit became crystal clear in the future

leader's head. Likewise, Ahlman tells us that it is there where Nkrumah started cultivating plans for pan-Africanism as no one single country could shore up its capital alone.

Unlike other biographies of Nkrumah, Ahlman stresses conscious attempts at balancing between the narrow nationalistic policies and the wider pan-Africanist perspectives in Nkrumah's priorities. As a result, he questioned "[its] leadership's overly cautious approach to the question of African self-determination" (p.96), leading him to found the CPP, the Convention People's Party. For Nkrumah, it was clear that the root of the colonial system was international capitalism, and as such, Ghana alone could not stand against the monster. Hence, only a transnational movement could have the chance to reverse international capitalism.

Chapter Five, "Between Nation and Pan-Africanism," outlines an accelerated form of Pan-Africanism where Nkrumah concluded, in light of settler colonialism, that passive and non-violent resistance was unworkable - only by recruiting and training guerrilla fighters could Africans regain their destiny. It was mainly at this stage, when we started seeing counterrevolutionary coups in the Congo, Nigeria, French Equatorial Africa, and Somalia, that Nkrumah saw the necessity for military intervention. The chapter enumerates Ghana's developmental achievements in education, industry, and infrastructure, which were by no means small or limited, given how things evolved in the years and decades afterward.

The following chapter, "Exile and an Era of Reinvention," notes that following the coup of February 1966, another period in Nkrumah's thinking and activism, characterized by revising the entire postcolonial scene and neocolonialism, emerged. The revision concludes that international capitalism was bent on literally emptying African independence. As a result, we meet a more radical Nkrumah, someone who pushed for guerrilla welfare and class struggle.

Chapter Seven, “Remembering Nkrumah,” addresses the contested legacies mainly in Nkrumah’s native Ghana and the continent. Nkrumah, Ahlman argues, was resurrected from the dead several times, wherein this or that politician or movement marshaled his name.

Overall, Ahlman’s biography stresses how Nkrumah’s thinking evolved throughout his career, particularly as he was eventually able to register the postcolonial predicament and the very contradiction on which post-coloniality sits. Raising a national flag does not translate into economic self-determination. The contradiction questions the same objective of decolonization. Because he dared to push the contradiction to the fore of his agenda and actively sought to reverse it, the February 1966 coup erupted. Ahlman takes Nkrumah’s trust in change through state apparatus at its face value, even when that change has incorporated class struggle and Fanonian violence. Inspired by Lenin, Nkrumah could not see the apparatus of the state as rot and decay by default, not by mistake. The moment one decides to work through the apparatus of the state, that apparatus reverses the proclaimed liberating objectives. Ayi Kwei Armah’s first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), adds context to Nkrumah’s shortsightedness.

Be that as it may, Ahlman’s biography remains limited by the genre of writing. Perhaps a volume that comparatively considers the political careers of early postcolonial leaders such as Boumédiène, Lumumba, Nasser, Sadat, and even the Shah of Iran in tandem with Nkrumah could serve in clarifying that capitalism-in-crisis (because of the fall in the rates of profit), and which decolonization was initially chased to solve, could not tolerate meaningful development and true nation-building. A development that could generate an alternative globalization that blows off the enslaving perimeters set by decolonization could not be tolerated by the forces of capital-in-crisis. Again, in the context of Nkrumah’s Ghana, one has to read Godfrey

Mwakikagile's *Western Involvement in Nkrumah's Downfall* (2015). Ahlman's biography thus crystallizes the understanding that Nkrumah's visions, even when theoretically muddled, can upset the triumphant but false omnipresence that dictatorially reigns over the world in the name of democracy and human rights.

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