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Kwame Nkrumah: Life After the Coup And the Conakry Period

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

The following was adapted from remarks by June Milne, literary executrix of Kwame Nkrumah's estate and publisher of the London-based Panaf Books Ltd., during the formal presentation of Nkrumah's Conakry papers to Howard University this past April.

Nkrumah was born in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in 1909 and was first educated there before coming to the United States in 1935 to further his education at Lincoln University and, subsequently, at the University of Pennsylvania. After 10 years in the U.S., he went to England to study at the London School of Economics. At the same time, he intensified his political activities for the independence of his homeland, which he led to full nationhood on March 6, 1957. He was toppled from power in 1966 as a result of a coup by army officers and remained in exile in neighboring Guinea until his death in 1971 in Bucharest, Romania, where he had gone for medical treatment.

Thomas C. Battle, director of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, who accepted the valuable gift on behalf of the university, made special note of Nkrumah's long association with Howard, dating back to 1943 when Nkrumah gave a speech on Africa at Rankin Chapel. At that time, Nkrumah was an instructor at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and the president of the African Students Association in the United States of America and Canada.

After Ghana's independence, Battle added: "Dr. Nkrumah visited Howard University (1958), the only institution of higher learning on the itinerary for his official state visit, toured the campus and addressed members of the university community. In 1957 he had been awarded the Doctor of Laws degree, honoris causa. Following Dr. Nkrumah's death in Bucharest, Romania, a memorial service was held in Rankin Chapel where he had so eloquently spoken nearly thirty years earlier."

Of the Conakry papers, Battle said: "The papers of Kwame Nkrumah will be an important source for scholars of Pan Africanism, African liberation, and progressive thought when they have been fully processed and made available for research." He thanked June Milne for "her appreciation of our dedication to the Black experience, for her confidence in our staff and our institution."

Kwame Nkrumah: *Life After the Coup and the Conakry Period*

By June Milne

The Conakry period of Kwame Nkrumah's life lasted just over five years, from March 1966 until he left for medical treatment in Bucharest, Romania, in August 1971. Yet those five years, out of the 63 years he lived, will come to be regarded as among the most interesting of his life. This short period will rank in significance, I believe, with the 10 years (1947-1957) he led the national liberation struggle in the Gold Coast to victory and the birth of the new nation of Ghana on March 6, 1957.

The 10 years of struggle for independence from colonial yoke, and the subsequent 9 years of Nkrumah's government, are well known and of immense importance in the history of Ghana and of Africa within the context of Pan-Africanism and Afro-American history. The pre-1966 years have been researched and written about, though there is still much scope for further study and assessment. The same cannot be said of the Conakry period.

In Guinea, Nkrumah lived in Villa Syli and was no longer in a position of executive governmental power, yet he exercised the most profound influence on African and Pan-African affairs. It was a remarkable period for him. During this time, not only did the full development of Nkrumah's political philosophy find expression, but his key positions in African and Pan-African history became assured. He wrote seven books and four pamphlets in Conakry, which provide the substance of his political thought during that period.

In his book, *Dark Days in Ghana*, he sketchily describes life in the Guinean capital in a chapter titled "In Conakry." The chapter begins with a brief description of the beautiful setting of the city: "It is magnificently situated on a promontory of land jutting out into the sea. Wherever you go in the city you are only a few minutes away from sandy beaches and beautiful



views of neighbouring coasts. Off-shore are several islands, Kassa, Fotoba, Tamara and others, one of which is said to have provided the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*."

Villa Syli stood on the coast about halfway between Conakry Airport and the city center. It was an old colonial-style residence, built on two levels, with a lower terrace which jutted out onto the beach. At high tide, the sea lapped against three of its walls. From the seafront, Nkrumah could see the off-shore islands, and the distant shore of so-called Portuguese Guinea, where a fierce liberation struggle was being fought, led by Amílcar Cabral. Looking eastwards, Nkrumah could see the hills of Sierra Leone. Ghana did not seem so far away.

Nkrumah, in his book, went on to outline some of the day-to-day activities which kept him busy:

"My days have been full, but not with the tedious administrative details of government. It has been a great joy to have time to spend with the many visitors who have come to Guinea to see me from all over Africa, and from countries overseas. These visitors, freedom fighters and members of progressive organisations, have discussed their problems with me. Far from feeling isolated . . . I have never felt more in touch with African and world affairs. I have an efficient communications system which enables me to keep up to date with events inside Ghana and elsewhere.

"Each day there is a vast amount of office work to be done. Reports, compiled from radio and other sources, have to be read, analysed and acted upon, correspondence dealt with, and detailed plans made for the carrying on of the revolutionary struggle."

The time he spent in Guinea, Nkrumah wrote, was among "the happiest in my life." But for obvious reasons, Nkrumah gave few details of his life in Conakry. He did not give the names of those who visited him, or what organizations he kept in touch with, or how he maintained contact with them. The reader can only surmise the pressures, influences, and books he studied during the Conakry period, all of which helped to mold his actions and thought, and which contributed to his amazing literary output during those five years.

So, for material about those years up until now, we have Nkrumah's brief account in *Dark Days in Ghana*. We also have the spoken and written accounts of a few other commentators. Unfortunately, some have been less than qualified for the task, others have made exaggerated and dishonest claims to special knowledge and familiarity with Nkrumah during this time.

I was able to see at first-hand much of the day-to-day life in Villa Syli. I visited there 16 times between 1966 and 1971, staying in a bungalow adjoining the Villa, and spending weeks at a time working at a desk at one end of the long seafront terrace. At the other end was Nkrumah's table and desk.

I made several trips between London and Conakry with typescripts, galley proofs and proofs for the books and pamphlets Nkrumah completed during that period. At every stage of the production, Nkrumah would carefully scrutinize every sentence to make sure that it expressed in the best possible way exactly what he wanted to say. Frequently, after I had departed from Conakry carrying what I thought was his final draft, he would cable me alterations to a particular phrase or paragraph, and in some cases send whole paragraphs to be added or deleted if there was still time for the printer to make the changes.

To add to the Nkrumah materials already at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, I am donating files and papers which I was able to collect from Villa Syli in August 1986. These include 43 files of correspondence, cables, news reports, and other papers, most of which are of great historical importance. They provide unique primary source material spanning all the years which Nkrumah spent in Conakry.

Also, they cover the short period Nkrumah spent in Peking in 1966 when he first heard news of the military coup in Ghana that toppled his government, as well as the months when he lay ill in Bucharest from August 1971 to his death in April 1972.

When these papers are studied, it will be possible to get an authentic picture of Nkrumah's life and work during the Conakry period.

I had been trying ever since Nkrumah's death to find out what had happened to his books and papers in Villa Syli. The death of President Sékou Touré, and the military coup which followed soon after, made my task doubly difficult and protracted. Nkrumah had appointed me his publisher and his literary executrix, leaving me his copyright and all his books and papers. It was my responsibility, therefore, to ensure the safety for posterity of the precious material I knew to be in Conakry.

I had been led to understand that on Nkrumah's death his books and papers had been packed into boxes and safely stored in a room at Villa Syli, which had become a military barracks after the coup. What I did not know, until I arrived in Conakry, was that the boxes had been broken into and the contents exposed to mice, insects and even rainwater. Fortunately, the damage is mainly to the edges of the files and papers. But had they been left there for much longer, all might have been lost.

I cannot be sure that I have all the papers which Nkrumah left behind when he departed for medical treatment, but I was able to bring back everything I could find.

The conditions in which I found the Conakry papers underline the vital importance of the role institutions outside Africa — institutions like the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University — can play as custodians of Africa's historical heritage.

Quite apart from political uncertainties, Africa lacks enough trained archivists to handle sensitive papers. And where archivists do exist, there are often no suitable conditions where such papers can be preserved from extremes of heat and humidity.

At the time of the 1966 coup in Ghana, soldiers ransacked Nkrumah's office in Flagstaff House and made bonfires of his books and papers. I have been told that all the files and records of the Accra Bureau of African Affairs, the body concerned with African liberation movements, fell into the hands of foreign intelligence agents.

During successive coups in Ghana, files and records relating to the Nkrumah period in Ghana have similarly either been destroyed or have completely disappeared. Hence the importance of preserving in a safe place for posterity historical materials relating to Africa.

The Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, already the repository of a fine collection of secondary and primary source Nkrumah material relating mainly to the pre-1966 years, is now the sole possessor of primary source material relating to the Conakry period as well.

Scholars studying these papers will find vivid and unique insight into Nkrumah's character, the writing of his books, his thinking on African and world affairs, and the activities and objectives which absorbed him during those important years. They will discover, too, some of the strains and pressures under which he labored; and they cannot fail to be impressed by the sustained, courageous effort which he kept up to the very end.

What emerges clearly is his unflagging optimism and determination. It was not a sad or frustrating period of Nkrumah's life as some have wished to maintain. It was a period of immense effort, organization and high hopes; a period of stimulation and achievement.

Going through the files, scholars will discover rich material concerning Nkrumah's connections and commitment to Pan-Africanism. The very fact that Nkrumah chose to go to Guinea to live after the coup was in itself a Pan-African act. He chose to accept the invitation of President Sékou Touré not only because Touré was a personal friend, but also because Touré shared Nkrumah's Pan-Africanist ideals. The Ghana-Guinea Union of 1958, and again the Ghana-Guinea-Mali Union of 1961, were to provide the nucleus of an eventual united Africa. When Nkrumah arrived in Conakry on that historic day, March 2, 1966, Touré, in an unprecedented expression of Pan-Africanism, proclaimed Nkrumah president of Guinea and was ready to step down. Nkrumah was deeply moved, but only agreed to become co-president. I can think of no historical parallel to either Toure's proposal or to the role Nkrumah subsequently fulfilled in Conakry as co-president of Guinea.

Nkrumah's first reaction to news of the coup in Ghana was typical. He saw it primarily as a setback for the African Revolution. He had declared at Ghana's independence that the independence of Ghana was meaningless unless it was linked to the total liberation of the African continent. Throughout the period of his leadership in Ghana, and even after the coup, Pan-Africanism guided his every action.

Indeed, in all of the books and pamphlets

written after 1966, and in the correspondence among the Conakry papers, what emerges most strongly is Nkrumah's commitment to Pan-Africanism and the extraordinary breadth and variety of his contacts world-wide and within Africa. We know, for example, about his closeness to Amílcar Cabral during the Conakry period. Cabral was a regular visitor to the Villa Syli, making a point to consult Nkrumah every-time he left Conakry, either for the battlefield or for trips abroad to raise support for the liberation war in Guinea-Bissau. On his return to Conakry, he would always hasten to meet with Nkrumah.

What can now be discovered as a result of the Conakry papers is the other people and organizations that Nkrumah sustained with his inspiration and wisdom during those years in Guinea.

In the correspondence files, there are interesting details, such as the increasing use of the word "unification" instead of "unity" when referring to the goal of a united Africa. He thought the phrase "African unity" to be too vague and preferred "African unification," which indicated the practical building of a unified Africa. In his book *Handbook of Revolutionary Warfare*, he suggests the actual political and military structures necessary to bring about the unification of Africa.

It was because he wanted to be in a position to put these plans of Pan-Africanism into practice that he wanted to return to Ghana where the infrastructure existed for their implementation. He was not interested in a return to Accra so that he could become once more the leader of the country. He would on his return, he said, devote his time to working for the total liberation of the continent and to its unification.

For a summary of the development of Nkrumah's political philosophy during the Conakry period, it is useful to compare the two editions of *Axioms*, the first of which was published by Thomas Nelson and Sons in 1967. This contained quotations from Nkrumah's speeches and writings up to February 1966. The second, the freedom fighters' edition of *Axioms*, published by Panaf Books, has the added quotations from Nkrumah's writings during the Conakry period.

Comparing the two editions, there are, for example, six new sections in the freedom fighters' *Axioms: Black Power, Peoples' Militia, Revolutionary War, Propaganda, The Role of Women*, and "Third

World." In addition, there are many other axioms under the headings of *Imperialism, Independence, Nationalism, Neocolonialism, People*, and *Racialism*.

On the other hand, certain axioms in the Nelson edition are omitted in the Panaf edition, one of the most interesting being the section *Non-Alignment*. Nkrumah retained the section *Co-Existence* but omitted the quotation from his book *Africa Must Unite* (published in 1963), which stated: "The balance of forces in the world today has reached a stage that the only avenue open to mankind is peaceful co-existence."

The significance of this omission is seen when one reads the pamphlet "The Myth of the Third World," which Nkrumah wrote in Conakry. He wrote about the period of the non-aligned movement in the early 1960s when he and other leaders of the movement, such as Nehru of India, Sukarno of Indonesia, Tito of Yugoslavia and Keita of Mali, considered it the duty of the non-aligned states to assert their weight against the senseless build-up of nuclear weapons which threatened the whole world.

The two great power blocs of East and West poised, it seemed, "on the brink of nuclear warfare, there appeared to be reprieve for the world only in the holding of a balance of power by some third force which would prevent either of the two sides from starting a major war," Nkrumah wrote.

However, while in Conakry, in the changed world situation of détente, and with the armed phase of the revolutionary struggle well launched in Africa, Asia and Latin America, Nkrumah considered it no longer possible to adopt a third position outside the main conflict.

I note this progression of Nkrumah's political thought as only one of the more significant examples of how his ideas developed after 1966. Nkrumaism had never been a hard and fast dogma. It evolved over many years. Although the basic political concepts remained constant, Nkrumaism adapted to changing African and world conditions.

I come now to Nkrumah's place in Afro-American history, and evidence in the Conakry papers of his close connections and interest in Afro-American affairs.

Ever since his 10 years in America (1935-1945), Nkrumah had kept in touch with events in America. During the period of his government in Ghana, many Afro-Americans visited Accra and many stayed

to work there. At Ghana's independence, Martin Luther King Jr., then only at the start of his career, was invited to the official celebrations, and Nkrumah saw to it that King was accorded the same VIP treatment as Vice-President Richard Nixon, the official representative of the American government.

Nkrumah also invited the aging W.E.B. Du Bois to spend his remaining years in Ghana as guest of the people of Ghana. There are many other examples showing Nkrumah's deep interest and understanding of peoples of African descent living outside Africa.

It was while in Conakry that he wrote *The Spectre of Black Power*, and an article entitled "Message to the Black People of Britain." A letter in one of the Conakry files reveals that he wrote this at the suggestion of Julia Wright, the daughter of the eminent novelist Richard Wright. She was in Conakry for a time, and kept in touch with Nkrumah after she left.

There are letters to and from Charles Howard, the journalist who wrote so prolifically in America on African affairs, and who remained a staunch supporter of Nkrumah.

Also, there is correspondence with James and Grace Boggs, the Detroit activists, and with Shirley Du Bois, the widow of W.E.B. Du Bois.

Other files among the Conakry papers contain handwritten daily reports of radio broadcasts from Ghana. They include secret messages signalled between units of the Ghana armed forces and police, a few of which Nkrumah included in his book, *Dark Days in Ghana*. The originals can now be studied. They are of extra interest because Nkrumah has often annotated or otherwise marked them, indicating which items especially interested him.

What Nkrumah left behind is inspiration — the inspiration of his example and achievements — summed up in the word Nkrumaism, with all that the word implies.

He provided, and still provides, inspiration for countless people, not only Africans and peoples of African descent, but also any movement struggling to achieve a better world — a world in which ordinary people can live in peace, in freedom, with dignity and purpose.

This is the legacy of Kwame Nkrumah, expressed so aptly in three words which he chose to be placed beneath the crest of independent Ghana in 1957: FREEDOM AND JUSTICE. □





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