
Welcome Address at the Opening Ceremony of the Kwame Nkrumah International (KNIC) Conference

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Thank you all Seema, Farhad, and John for the kind words.

While I would reserve my thanks to the long list of helpers and enablers to the closing ceremony, I cannot resist the temptation to thank my colleague, Dr. Frances Chiang, who more than anyone else, helped me in planning and executing this conference. For the past two years Dr. Chiang, in a display of extraordinary patience and dogged determination has stuck with me through thick and thin, through moments of despair and disappointments, frustration and anguish to the logical end. Frances, I am grateful to you. You are one of the most dependable and trustworthy persons I have ever met.

I also think it is important to render special thanks to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Kwantlen's Office of Research and Scholarship and the Centre for Academic Growth whose generous grants made it possible for us to invite our keynote and plenary speakers. Lastly, I thank my family for their patience and tolerance. For the past two years they have had more than their fill of my obsessive pre-occupation and the only string in my conversational violin—KNIC. Geralda, Maayaa, Christopher, and Malaika, thank you for your tolerance and most of all your encouragement. I am thankful to you.

This conference will probably be the last event in the year-long series of activities around the world to commemorate the centenary anniversary of the birth of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Africa's Man of the Millennium and perhaps the most famous pan-Africanist after Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois. It is noteworthy that the conference is being held at the confluence of the anniversaries of several monumental events in Africa, the most important of which is the fiftieth anniversary of what is popularly referred to as "The Year of Africa."

The year 1960 witnessed a host of events, including the end of the Mau Mau resistance in Kenya, mass riots during Charles de Gaulle's trip to Algeria, the murder of sixty-nine non-violent protestors in South Africa's Sharpeville Massacre, and independence for seventeen African nations. While the year was marked by both the entrenched brutality of European colonial rule and the birth of new African nations, there was an overwhelming sense of optimism for a vibrant, independent, and self-sufficient Africa.

The KNIC also coincides with the twentieth anniversary of the release of Nelson Mandela from jail, which signaled the demise of the apartheid system in South Africa. As well, this conference coincides with the 125th anniversary of the Berlin Conference, which partitioned Africa among the European imperial powers. Finally, this conference coincides with yet another important milestone in the annals of Africa's liberation movement, the sixty-fifth anniversary of the fifth Pan-African Congress held in Manchester, of which Nkrumah was the organizing secretary.

The KNIC is also being held at a time when Africa's continental body, the African Union (AU), has accepted and is working on Nkrumah's blueprint for a continental union government. As one of the founders of the predecessor continental body, the Organization of African Unity, Nkrumah had single-mindedly and stoutly campaigned for a continental union government of Africa to pool its vast natural and human resources for the benefit of the continent's peoples.

In July 2009, the AU issued a "Declaration on the Celebration of the 100th Birthday Anniversary of Kwame Nkrumah," praising him as "an advocate of pan-Africanism who played a vital role in the establishment of our Continental Organization and the liberation of the Continent."

But as the AU progresses towards Nkrumah's vision of a United States of Africa, an intense debate rages in both academia and the political sphere as to whether Africa is ready for a continental union government. The debate also revolves around which is the best route to a continental government: a gradual, piecemeal route through regional economic unions, or a radical and immediate political and economic union, as proposed by Nkrumah. Scholars of all stripes agree that peace, security, good governance, and sound economic management are pre-conditions for ending the economic marginalization of Africa. But this is where the agreement ends.

Scholarship on post-colonial Africa is riveted by several interconnected discursive debates on the historical, current, and future trajectories of the continent. The debates reflect two general politico-ideological positions: (1) the discourse of Afro-pessimism versus the discourse of Afro-optimism; and (2) the discourse of looking inward (internalist) versus the discourse of looking outward (externalist).

Briefly, Afro-pessimists insist that African underdevelopment is self-induced through inept, autocratic, and kleptocratic leadership, and that Western aid does more harm than good to the continent. Afro-optimists, on the other hand, argue that Africa's current parlous state is attributable to centuries of the trilogy of slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism (TSCN), and that the West has a moral obligation to right the wrongs of the past (slavery and colonialism) and end its continuing neo-colonial policies in Africa, if the continent is to have any hope to develop.

The “Afro-pessimism-Afro-optimism divide” also reflects diametrically opposed positions on pan-Africanism. Afro-pessimists dismiss pan-Africanism as a pipe dream, while Afro-optimists, like Kwame Nkrumah, see in pan-Africanism the antidote to African underdevelopment. Between the Afro-pessimists and Afro-optimists are the Afro-realists, who temper pessimism with healthy doses of optimism. While they take into account the weight of Africa's sordid colonial history and of 500 years vestiges of the TSCN, as well as the current lopsided global economic system, they also account for African agency—the creative energies of Africans to overcome at least some of their problems.

Several of the papers to be presented at this conference reflect this divide and will not only rekindle the longstanding debate but offer new and diverse insights against the backdrop of our post-Cold War, “post-racial” and globalizing world. Speakers will address critical issues facing the African continent, running the gamut from conflict prevention, governance, international development, social justice, globalization and terrorism to human rights, gender equity and youth education and empowerment.

This is truly an international conference. We have speakers from all parts of the globe, including, Australia, Portugal, The United Kingdom, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Kenya, the USA, Jamaica, and Canada.

Ladies and Gentlemen, at this juncture, permit me to attempt to briefly answer a question I surmise is on the minds of some of you: Who was Nkrumah?

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One hundred years ago, in the small village of Nkroful in the Western region of Ghana, a child was born. The event passed, as in the case of many children, as an ordinary event. And like many of African families, the parents of this child did not even take note of the date on which he was born. Later in his autobiography Nkrumah was to state that it was with some difficulty that he could pinpoint his birth date; September 21, 1909. As fate would have it, Kwame Nkrumah, the man his admirers called “Osagyefo,” (the redeemer) left our shore to join the ancestors when he succumbed to cancer and leukemia on a cold Romanian hospital bed in 1972.

Born into a humble smith's family, Nkrumah was to become one of the most illustrious makers of modern Africa, and perhaps the most ardent, consistent advocate of the unity of the Black race after Marcus Garvey. Nkrumah was a visionary and fearless leader of the African people whose desire to see the continent of Africa united knew no bounds. He led Ghana to independence on March 6, 1957 after more than a century of British colonial rule, the first in independence in sub-Saharan Africa. He declared on Ghana's Independence Day that Ghana's independence was meaningless unless it was linked with the liberation of the entire African continent.

In the slides on Nkrumah prepared by my students you saw excerpts of Nkrumah's books and speeches on Pan-Africanism, Global African Unity, and World Peace. Nkrumah's words of wisdom reveal the extent of his commitment to, unflagging zeal, and unquenchable, optimism in the African cause and world peace. It is no wonder many say he lived ahead of his times. Nkrumah's axioms should serve as constant reminders and signposts to Africans and all well-meaning people as we chart our way through the current millennium.

His single-minded desire to make Africa the proud home of all people's African descent dispersed around the world brought him to work together with leaders and architects of the Pan-Africanist movement including, W.E.B Du Bois of the United States, George Padmore of Trinidad, Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, Sekou Toure of Guinea, Modibo Keita of Mali, Patrice Lumumba of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

He was one of the organizers of the historic 5th Pan-Africanist Congress in Manchester more than half a century ago, a congress, which proved decisive in the struggle against foreign rule in Africa and racial oppression in the West, and demonstrated a remarkable unity between continental Africans and Africans in the Diaspora. He did not only bring Pan-Africanism to its natural home when he returned to the Gold Coast after his sojourn in America and England to lead the independence movement, he also established and sustained till the end of his regime, a link between the continent and the Diaspora.

Without doubt, Nkrumah ranks among the greatest political figures of the 20th century. An indefatigable champion of world peace, advocate and spokesman of the Non-Aligned Movement, it was only ironic that his government was overthrown in a violent CIA-masterminded coup while he was on his way to Hanoi to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the war in Vietnam.

His courageous and tactical (Gandhian passive non-resistance or what he termed positive action) leadership led to the wresting of political independence of his country from Britain, the first in sub-Saharan Africa. Ghana's independence did not only become a power-keg that ignited a continental revolution against European imperialism, Nkrumah consciously made his newly liberated country the powerhouse of the African revolution.

Nkrumah's revolutionary and pan-Africanist ideas swept across the entire continent—from Casablanca to Cape Town. Consistent with his independence-day declaration that the independence of Ghana was meaningless unless it was linked with the total liberation of the entire African continent, Nkrumah trained African liberation fighters, financed their movements and encouraged them to dislodge colonial rule from their territories.

It was no wonder that in less than a decade after Ghana's independence in 1957, over 90 per cent of African countries had attained their own independence.

All of Nkrumah's adult life was devoted to one and one passion alone—the liberation and unity of the African race. He lived, dreamed and died for this ideal. This passion and quest for a continental union government prompted his enemies to brand him dreamer, a megalomaniac, an African Don Quixote. But judging from the parlous state of the continent's desperate, dispirited, non-viable 53 countries today, Nkrumah's call for the formation of a United States of Africa government was a wise one, if brazen at the time. Nkrumah argued forcefully that it was only a federal state of Africa based on a common market, a common currency, a unified army (an African High Command), and a common foreign policy that could provide the launching pad for not only a massive reconstruction and modernization of the continent, but also optimize Africa's efforts to find its rightful place in the international arena and to effectively checkmate internal conflicts, fend off superpower interference, predatory and imperialistic wars.

But Nkrumah's tragedy was probably that he came to power at an inauspicious time, in the "heat" of the cold war, a period when the bi-polar East-West ideological confrontation made leaders like Nkrumah sacrificial lambs on the altar of superpower chauvinism. Cold War politics broached no homegrown nationalists and patriots; it did not forgive leaders who refused to worship the gods of Soviet communism or American capitalism. Would Nkrumah's ideas have been much more welcome in this post-cold war, uni-polar, globalizing world? It is difficult to say.

A continental union government as advocated by Nkrumah may not have been a magic bullet or a panacea for all of the continent's seemingly intractable problems, but one can say without fear of contradiction, that the situation in the continent would be better than it is today. For such a union would have made it possible for the marshalling and pooling of the continent's rich resources for the collective benefit of the citizens of Africa. Advantages of economies of scale, the avoidance of duplicity, presenting a united voice in world affairs, and a collective bargain in international trade (instead of Africans competing among ourselves for the lowest commodity prices at the international bargaining table) are, but a few of the fruits that could be reaped in a continental union government.

The examples on both sides of the Atlantic where the European Union and the North American Free Trade Agreement have united countries of disparate cultures, languages, and political and even ideological orientations, coupled with the surging globalization of the world economy point to the breadth of Nkrumah's vision.

But Nkrumah was no paragon of political virtues; he had his flaws. His one-party state 'democracy' stifled different and divergent views from the other side of the political divide.

His installation as "Life President" of his party, the Convention People's Party, made him a dictator in the eyes of many. He also did nothing to discourage party cronies from turning him into a demigod. While he did not subject his opponents to the callous, brutal repression and bloody massacres symptomatic of African dictators such as Idi Amin of Uganda and Jean-Bédél Bokassa of Central African Republic, Nkrumah did use the Preventative Detention Act (PDA) enacted by the British Colonial Administration to throw his political opponents into jail without trial. His enforcement of the PDA to crack down on his opponents, who were bent on unseating him through terrorist bombings and numerous assassination attempts, was criticized as dictatorial and draconian.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this conference represents the first effort in Canada to bring together scholars from across this country and internationally to share their research and ideas about Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. It is hoped that it will provide an excellent opportunity for scholars and students from different disciplines to connect with peers, share ideas, and cultivate knowledge.

We are convinced that the conference offers a unique opportunity to contextualize Nkrumah's pan-Africanist agenda within the neo-liberal global project and against the backdrop of the current global economic and political ferment. And we hope it will generate new ideas, revise and fortify old ones, and cross-fertilize theories on international/transnational development, post-colonial Africa, and global/international issues.

As the first international conference dedicated to "Africa's Man of the Millennium" in Canada in a period of intense academic debate about the merits and demerits of the globalization and the place and role of the tri-continents of Africa, Asia and Latin America, the conference will provide Canadian scholars a unique and timely opportunity to seriously engage and scrutinize Nkrumah's intellectual and political legacy in the areas of international political economy and governance.

Dr. Kwame Nkrumah wrote eloquently in his book *Consciencism* that thought without practice is blind and practice without thought is empty. To Nkrumah, praxis—the blending of ideas and action, letting theory inform practice and vice-versa constituted the single most effective way to nation building. He therefore urged scholars to descend from their ivory towers and go down to the ordinary, disenfranchised and impoverished people to help re-build their lives in concrete, practical terms.

He also advised activists against a disdain of academic knowledge, but rather learn from and work together with progressive scholars to change the world for the better. It is in the light of this advice that the organizers have decided to donate part of the proceeds of the banquet to be held on Saturday to the Ghanaian-Canadian Association of British Columbia Youth Scholarship Fund. The money will be used to provide scholarships to deprived students in rural Ghana.

We have also decided to appeal for donations for flood victims in Pakistan. The money collected will be divided between the Canadian Red Cross and Doctors without Borders for onward transmission to the flood victims. We have placed a donation box at the registration desk. Donations of \$20 or more will be tax deductible.

As we say in Ghana, *Akwaaba*, a big welcome to you all.

I invite you to enjoy what is shaping up to be an intellectually stimulating and culturally enriching conference.

Thank you kindly.