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Kwame Nkrumah: The Years Abroad 1935-1947. by Marika Sherwood, Freedom Publications, Legon, Ghana, 1996, 202 p. [Paperback] ISBN 99887716 06

Of all the major leaders of the postwar anticolonial struggle in Africa, Kwame Nkrumah stands out as both the best known and the most controversial figure in the history of African decolonization. Ghana, formerly the Gold Coast and the country he led to freedom in 1957, owes its historical significance as the first black country to achieve independence in the 20th century as well as its political weight in African affairs to Nkrumah's outstanding qualities as a Pan-African freedom fighter.

How did a person from humble origins and born around 1909 in a Ghanaian fishing village rise to become a major historical figure? Marika Sherwood's outstanding book on Nkrumah's life between 1935 and 1947 provides a clear and brilliant answer to this question. For if Francis Nwia-Kofi Nkrumah's upbringing as his mother's only child, his early schooling as a pupil and a pupil teacher in Roman Catholic schools in rural Ghana together with his training at the elite Achimota College in Accra were indispensable for his overall intellectual development, it is the academic training and political education received during the twelve difficult years abroad that fashioned Kwame Nkrumah into the great nationalist and Pan-African leader we know today.

The book under review provides an extremely rich documentation on these politically formative years in two parts: "the American years," 1935 to 1945 and "the London years", 1945 to 1947. The first ten years were intensely academic, and were spent at two U.S. institutions of higher education, Lincoln University — an African American liberal arts college, and the nearby University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Nkrumah was an outstanding student at Lincoln, graduating magna cum laude with a B.A. in sociology in 1939. He also worked there in various capacities as a teaching assistant and as an instructor, including a one-year appointment as professor of Philosophy and Logic, Elementary Greek, and Negro Civilization and History in 1944-45.

In addition to earning a Master of Science degree in education at the University of Pennsylvania, Nkrumah assisted in teaching African language at the Institute of

Languages and Culture. Unfortunately, his Ph.D. dissertation in Philosophy was rejected, presumably for being “too pro-Communitistic” (p. 64).

With little financial support, Nkrumah engaged in extramural activities likely to earn him some money for his living and educational expenses. Thus, he made use of his Bachelor’s degree in Sacred Theology, earned in 1942 from Lincoln University’s Theological Seminary — a Presbyterian seminary — to obtain a licentiate from the Chester Presbytery for purposes of preaching the gospel. He apparently preached virtually every Sunday in different churches in Philadelphia, New York, or Washington. Since the Christian ministry was not his real calling, he did not choose to move a step further by being ordained as a minister. A second extramural activity was manual labor, including work at a shipbuilding and dry dock company near Philadelphia.

Throughout all these years, Nkrumah remained steadfast in his single-minded determination to work for Africa’s freedom from colonial rule. The testimonies of his contemporaries are unanimous on his unyielding commitment to the struggle. Whatever he was doing — giving a sermon, writing a term paper in philosophy, etc. — Nkrumah would always find a way to “twist around” to Africa (pp. 51, 63).

The opportunity to develop his interest and enthusiasm about Africa came through Nkrumah’s involvement in the activities of African and African American political and civil rights organizations such as the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), founded by Marcus Garvey, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Council on African Affairs (CAA) and the African Students Association (ASA). It was through this involvement that he came into contact with distinguished Pan-African leaders like Amy Ashwood Garvey, Claudia Vera Jones, W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, C.L.R. James and Alphaeus Hunton. Among these were others who later on sided with the U.S. government against progressive Pan-Africanists; e.g. Ralph Bunche and Max Yergan.

Part Two of the book examines the London years, 1945 to 1947. Proportionately, the author devotes more space to these two years (84 pages) than to the ten years spent in America (96 pages). This is appropriate, given the fact that it was during these two years that Nkrumah was actually engaged in organizing the anticolonial struggle in West Africa through the West African National Secretariat (WANS) of the Pan-African movement. Having helped George Padmore organize and manage the 1945 Pan-African Congress in Manchester, Nkrumah went on to concentrate on WANS activities, in collaboration with the West African Students Union (WASU) and the international working class movement, whose representatives included members and former members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

This connection with both the Pan-African and international working class movements provides the major themes around which Marika Sherwood organizes

her book. These are (1) “the circularity and smallness of the anti-imperialist world,” (2) “the organisations in which Nkrumah gained the political experience he took with him to the Gold Coast in 1947,” (3) “the level of communist influence” in the anti-imperialist movement, and (4) the surveillance and intelligence gathering activities of the British and U.S. governments *vis-à-vis* African nationalists (p. 3).

Sherwood has a very narrow view of the “anti-imperialist world,” as she seems to limit it to the African students and professionals abroad together with their African-American (including African Caribbean) and non-African supporters. That those abroad did constitute a small circle of people who knew each other and interacted frequently cannot be disputed. However, the leadership of the anticolonial struggle by the Nkrumahs, Azikiwes, Kenyattas, Wallace-Johnsons and many others could not have succeeded in the absence of an emerging mass nationalist movement of peasants, workers, students and civil servants that was decidedly anti-imperialist. And it is only leaders like Nkrumah, who recognized the strength and vibrancy of this mass base, who were able to mobilize the people and to channel popular energies into a successful struggle for independence.

The analysis of the various organizations in which Nkrumah gained his political experience also suffers from the elitist bias in Sherwood’s approach. However useful they were in developing strong personal bonds among people who went on to become national leaders in Africa and in initiating their members in the techniques of lobbying, issuing position papers and publishing newspapers and books, organizations such as the ASA, WASU and WANS were severely limited by their lack of a mass base. On the other hand, the most useful lessons for Nkrumah’s subsequent leadership of the Convention People’s Party (CPP) must have come from his associations with the UNIA and black workers’ groups in America and in Britain. Unfortunately, the book offers very little information on this aspect of Nkrumah’s life abroad.

In discussing communist influence in the anti-imperialist movement, the question of whether or not Nkrumah himself was a communist seems to fascinate the author as much as that of the women, if any, in Nkrumah’s social life. Fortunately, Sherwood concurs with the overwhelming majority of her informers that Nkrumah was not the kind of person who would submit to directives from Moscow or subordinate the African independence struggle to any form of external control. Support from communists and the entire international working class movement was accepted and appreciated, as it helped to destabilize the colonial system.

In this regard, that the M15 (British intelligence) and the Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the forerunner of the CIA) did build elaborate files on African freedom fighters, should not astonish us. In preparation for eventually supplanting Great Britain as the leading Western power in Africa, the U.S. had taken prudent

steps in beefing up its consulates in strategic locations such as Accra, Kinshasa and Lagos, for purposes of learning more about African nationalism and knowing who's who among the future leaders of Africa.

On the whole, Marika Sherwood has done an outstanding job in elucidating the background to Nkrumah's years in power. A better knowledge of his years abroad should prepare us for understanding the problems he would later on encounter with the reactionaries of the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) who invited him back home to serve as general secretary of the UGCC, on the one hand, and with the imperialist powers which saw him as a threat to their neocolonial schemes, on the other. Nkrumah's mistakes, and the increasingly authoritarian style of rule he developed, can also be traced to the secretive and elitist world of his political education.

Overthrown in 1966 in a military coup d'état after 15 years of political power, Nkrumah died in exile in 1972. This book, which should be read in conjunction with Nkrumah's own version of these crucial years in **The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah** (1957), is based on meticulous research at over 20 major archival centres and numerous interviews with most of Nkrumah's contemporaries who were still alive during its preparation. It should be read by all those who are interested in the exemplary life and work of Kwame Nkrumah, who opened up the political kingdom so that the masses of the African people could seize the occasion to improve their lot and ensure a better future for their children.

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