

# MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



*Scroll down to read the article.*

**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-Communist” (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.

19 Bodle Avenue, Eastlea  
Harare, Zimbabwe

Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja

**The Truman Administration and the Decolonization of Sub-Saharan African.** by Macharia Munene. Nairobi University Press, Nairobi, Kenya 1995, x-242pp. [Paperback] ISBN 9966 846 37 9, KSHs.350.

This book is the product of a doctoral thesis presented to Ohio University, Athens, USA in 1985. It is an extensively researched and clearly written study with seven chapters. The book sets out to examine the contradictory ideals and practices of American policy towards Africa and Africa-Americans in general.

The first two chapters examine American history prior to the Truman administration. During this period, slavery, racism and imperialism characterised Africa's relations with the rest of the capitalist world. American leaders consequently remained ambiguous in their policies towards Blacks in the Diaspora. Leaders like Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and James Monroe are noted for their racist views on slavery and civil rights for Blacks in America. Such racist trends are thought to have influenced America's attitudes towards Africa.

However, Woodrow Wilson is depicted as one American leader who espoused an anti-imperialist stand. He believed that world peace was always undercut by conflicts emanating from colonial pursuits. Therefore by eradicating colonialism, world peace would be assured. Accordingly, he insisted on a global organization to oversee international peace. But the author does not critique Wilson's idealism in the context of the theoretical approaches available.

Truman, after Roosevelt, inherited an African policy in which American politico-economic considerations tampered her anti-colonial ideas. Those considerations swung American policy practice and rhetoric from anti-colonialism to pro-colonialism. Thus whereas America's foreign policy aspirations were intended to promote pro-colonial interests, her economic needs demanded an anti-colonial stand. Truman's policy therefore wavered between anti-imperialist rhetoric and pro-colonialism especially where American economic interests counted. US accommodation of European colonialism made it "vulnerable to charges of collusion with imperialism and insensitivity to colonial grievances"; and Russia capitalised on this to front a pro-African foreign policy.

The cold war and Africa's place in the US foreign policy between 1947-1948

are analysed in chapter four. No background information is provided for a contextualised and deeper understanding of the pre-1947 cold war jostling between the US, its allies and Russia. The author begins instantly noting the 1947 US policy shift from the earlier multilateralism and open door trade policy to a professed anti-Communist position. Without the relevant background, important events which would have informed this chapters are missed.

Nevertheless, the author argues that Washington began to view Africa in terms of its defense needs and European economic recovery, the latter as a cold war necessity. European problems in turn became American problems as Truman “picked up the whiteman’s burden ...” from the British and focused US policies on Russian communism. Russia countered this by demonstrating US involvement in colonial dealings and her failure to address racial problems at home. Such accusations disturbed Truman and influenced the *Point IV Programme* which was intended to counteract Russian propaganda.

Between the inauguration of Truman in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean war in 1950, several forces influenced US policy options as contained in the *Point IV Programme*. There was an obvious US commitment to placating colonial powers for cold war reasons. This considerably watered down US’ anti-imperialist rhetoric. Munene lucidly analyses the wheelings and dealings of US policy makers intended to stop European manipulations and Russian campaigns against her.

Chapter five shows that economic factors mattered most in US political decisions. Imbued with sympathy for dependent areas, the US offered support only where her economic interests were not jeopardized. She also sought civil rights solutions at home and distanced herself from imperialist affairs. But this was short-lived given the rise of conservatism in American thought. The *Point IV Programme* was branded as “probably the most mischievous document that had ever been published since Marx and Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto* 100 years ago”. Indeed, the outbreak of the Korean war marked the end of US commitment to an anti-imperialist stand and Truman was back to square one in his attempt to identify with the colonized people. The Korean war impelled Washington to focus more importantly on issues of military re-armament, security and defense. This again rendered the US culpable on the colonial question: the US-Belgium disagreement over Congo, the largest African uranium producer is a good example. Congo was important because uranium is a key raw material in the manufacture of atomic bombs.

Chapter 6 argues that by the 1950’s the US had reverted to pro-imperialism. Although she attempted to placate anti-colonial nations like India, colonized nations used her duplicity to justify nationalism and embrace communism. Up to the end of the Truman era, the East-West conflict was the priority over colonialism. In a nutshell, Truman always lost the opportunity of winning anti-colonialists to his side.

Nonetheless, this is a valuable book. It shows that independence for most African countries was not planned; African countries jumped from the frying pan of European colonialism to the fire of American neo-colonialism. In this respect, it illustrates that any political decision by US policy makers depended largely on that country's economic interests. US policy towards Africa was therefore concerted essentially by the need to open the sterling area to the dollar. This study provides an important lesson in statecraft for students of diplomacy, political science, economics and history. The study however hangs in a theoretical void by being essentially empirical and avoiding controversial issues.

Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya

Godwin Rapando Muruga