

Teaching African History through the Lion's Perspective: An Analysis of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah's Institute of African Studies

In his novel *House and Exile*, Chinua Achebe writes, "Until the lion learns to write his own story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."¹ For Achebe, the lion is the African, the lion's story is the African's culture, their heritage and history, while the hunter is the British colonizer. Achebe's underlying message was that it is important that "the lion," learns to reconstruct his own history instead of accepting a narrative forced by the colonizer. The history of the Institute of African Studies, created in 1961 by Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the first Prime Minister and President of Ghana, offers a hitherto unexplored avenue to understanding the educational and political shifts initiated by the "lion" writing for himself. This purpose is inscribed in the Institute's mission statement, which defines the organization's objective as promoting African scholarship and striving to become an internationally recognized center for the study of African history, sociology, culture, and contemporary African institutions. Nkrumah contended that the study of Africa and her peoples, both on the continent and in the diaspora, was critical for understanding the "African" identity and personality,² the amalgamation of the diversities and the complexities of African cultures.³

Under colonial rule, students living on the Gold Coast, or in modern day Ghana, learned about their past from British textbooks and teachers, and were mostly taught British history. The liberation of Ghana in 1957 enabled Nkrumah to advance his agenda for Pan-Africanism and

¹ Achebe, Chinua. *House and Exile*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 73

² Statement by the Government on the Report of the Commission on University Education December, 1960 – January, 1961 (Reference #: RG3/6/56) p. 6

³ Arhin, Kwame. *The Life and Works of Kwame Nkrumah*, (New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 1993) p. 23

African nationalism through higher education thus empowering Africans to write their own history. This being the case, I traveled to Ghana on May 18 to August 7 of 2014 in order to investigate how “the hunter” chose to teach the hunted its own history. It is important to examine the objectives of the development of higher education in Ghana during the early twentieth century and how these intentions influenced the construction of institutions of higher learning. In particular, it is vital to examine higher education in Ghana during the British Governor Sir Gordon Guggisberg’s administration (1919 -1927), as he founded Achimota College in 1924, an institution which trained African leaders until the end of colonial rule in 1957. Nkrumah, who later served as the first prime minister and president of the Gold Coast, was an alumnus of Achimota College. Nkrumah’s education at Achimota College later influenced his educational policies as President, particularly his encounter with Dr. Kwegyir Aggrey, who served as the assistant vice-principal and the first African member of the staff at this institution.

There are several interrelated questions that drive my arguments about the establishment of higher education in colonial Ghana. To what extent was it necessary for the colonial government to educate African people in a manner that suggested the Western way of governance was best? What was the primary purpose of higher education in places such as Achimota College or the University of Ghana before independence? The University of Ghana was originally an affiliate college of the University of London, and its academic programs. Moreover, the University of London supervised the degrees that the University of Ghana awarded. Was it solely to further the goals of the colonizers because the continuation of colonization required educated intermediaries with whom the British could work? I also seek to explore questions related to Nkrumah’s ideas about education including the following: What was the goal of educational training for Africans as determined by Nkrumah? How did Nkrumah

view the Institute's role in nation-building and African liberation in postcolonial Ghana?

Furthermore, what is lost or what perspective is hidden when certain Africans have the right to tell the story of other Africans after colonial rule? The answers to these questions deepen our analysis concerning the way in which education was utilized as a cultural and political means to control Africans. Answers to these inquiries have important implications for what it means to be African even today.

Although historians and social scientists have analyzed the development of education in Ghana, they have not explored the historical development of the Ghanaian history curriculum, an important subject for the country's national development. Recognizing the manner in which the history curriculum has had an impact on Ghanaian citizens' understanding of their nation, citizenship, cultural norms, and political rights provides us with a deeper analysis of curriculum policy. Studying curriculum policy in Ghana is critical as it helps us understand how European empires created historical narratives for their colonized peoples and how the colonized responded to those narratives. My research deals with transformations in higher education in postcolonial Ghana that connected educational development with nationalism and nation-building.

As previously mentioned, I conducted several weeks of archival research in Accra, Ghana analyzing the development of the Ghanaian history curriculum during the British colonial period and during the first decades of the former's independence. I examined the historical narratives that the British promoted in colonial government schools, how students of the Gold Coast engaged with these ideas, and how the history curriculum changed under President Kwame Nkrumah's postcolonial regime of the 1950s and 1960s. One of my most important discoveries was the manner in which Nkrumah appointed himself the primary gatekeeper of African history.

This summer, I traveled to Trinidad and Tobago to understand the man whom Nkrumah described as “The silent hero of the Ghanaian Revolution,” George Padmore, the leading Pan-Africanist, journalist, and author. With a Kellogg Research Grant, I conducted three weeks of archival research in Trinidad and Tobago analyzing Padmore’s work on Pan Africanism. I ultimately sought to discover how Padmore’s writings influenced the ways in which Nkrumah’s administration decided to teach African history post-colonialism in Ghana. After Ghana gained its independence on March 6, 1957, Nkrumah invited Padmore to serve as his educational advisor as well as chair the African Affairs department.

While at Trinidad and Tobago’s national archives, I was not able to locate the necessary information about Padmore. Consequently, I emailed Dr. Ronald Noel, a Pan-Africanist historian at the University of the West Indies. Dr. Noel introduced me to one of his colleagues Dr. Jerome Teelucksingh, the main organizer of the 2003 George Padmore Conference in Trinidad and Tobago. Dr. Teelucksingh introduced me to Professor Claudius Fergus, the head of the history department, who helped me gain access to the CLR James and George Padmore collection. From these collections, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of Padmore’s role in the fight for African liberation. For instance, I discovered that Padmore was in constant communication with W.E.B Du Bois, who later moved to Ghana to also serve as Nkrumah’s educational advisor, and Nkrumah as they sought to organize the Pan African Conference of 1945. Furthermore, Padmore trained and mentored many of the African liberation leaders from Nkrumah to Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya. Additionally, I was able to access CLR James unpublished work “Notes on the Life of George Padmore.” CLR James dedicated this unpublished biography of Padmore to Nkrumah and Padmore’s wife Dorothy.

In summary, my findings from Trinidad and Tobago complement the other archival research that I conducted both in Ghana and London. My experience from the Kellogg Research Grant has been a great addition as I continue to write my senior thesis.