

Reflections on Kwame Nkrumah: An
Interview with Neville Dawes
Executive Director, Institute of Jamaica

(The day is May 20, in the morning, and I am interviewing Brother Neville Dawes the Executive Director of the Institute of Jamaica regarding his experiences in Ghana under the political leadership of Kwame Nkrumah.)

Would you briefly explain how and when you first learned about Kwame Nkrumah and his struggle in Ghana?

Well, I learned about it sometime in 1948 or 1949. I learned about it at Oxford, actually, because there were some Ghanaians there and the struggle had started. In what was called the UGCC (United Gold Coast Convention), the party of Ghana struggling for independence, six of the leaders including Nkrumah had been jailed. My interest immediately became alive from that point. All of this took place between 1949 to about 1952, but I did not think of going to Ghana until I was back here, in Jamaica, in 1955.

What were the specific circumstances that led to your decision to go?

The circumstances are interesting. First of all, I had left Oxford and gone down to London for a year and a half. I was trying to get a job in Nigeria, for the simple reason that I was born in Nigeria, and I thought it would be a good thing to go and see what was going on there. But I didn't get the job in Nigeria. However, they kept my name on the books. And you know, in the colonial system, if you applied to one country you were eligible for another country. So they sent me a cable from London asking me if I was interested in going to the Gold Coast (Ghana). Now it was easy for me to make a decision then because I had been reading the Ashanti Pioneer which at that time carried a number of articles by George Padmore, and I knew Padmore in London. I became extremely interested in the struggle he depicted of a Black

country--the first African country--that would actually fight its way to independence. I would say, too, that I was encouraged in that view by Dudley Thompson who was at Oxford with me. (He's now a minister in government here.) The other circumstance was that I was assured by The People's National Party in Jamaica (which was not then the government of Jamaica) that they had no particular interest in fighting for independence. They were prepared to go along with the colonial thing, for awhile. So, it seemed to me that there was no point, in terms of my interest, in remaining in Jamaica.

And you would describe your interest as being?

Being leftwing, and certainly I considered that the most important thing for the colonies was to get rid of Britain, or whoever. As simple as that!

When did you actually go to Ghana?

The end of 1955, and I started teaching in 1956, January, 1956.

This is before independence?

Yes, this about a year and a half before independence.

Could you give very briefly what your perceptions of Africa were at that time, both traditional Africa as well as colonial Africa?

Yes, well the thing is that I had not really realized that in going to Kumasi I was dumped, so to speak, in the middle of the traditional area in Ghana, that is to say, everything that centered around The Ahenfie (the king's palace) and my first experience was related to the traditional culture. It was a pivotal experience for me. So that all things that related to the culture, I became absorbed in the first place. It wasn't until after independence, after 1957, that I became involved in (modern) political organization, the struggle that was going on. You

see in 1956 they had a straight forward election for independence and the Convention People's Party, which was Nkrumah's party, won that election in 1956, and Ghana became independent in 1957. There were a lot of younger people who felt that they needed to get some form of ideological training, and following on that discussions with political people and so on. I used to teach in the trade union to a number of young Ghanaian activists and that went very well for a while until the general secretary of the party came and told me not to teach those people unless I joined the party. And, so I said alright, I will join the party. I was a member, and I think I'm the only West Indian who was an actual fully paid-up member--card carrying member of the Convention People's Party. After that work, from 1957 to 1959, then I went to a Accra, having changed universities, and got further involved in the political struggle.

Could you describe what the party (CPP) was like--what kind of party was it? And could you begin to give some indication of the kind of leadership, both in terms of personal style, as well as ideological and political leadership, that Nkrumah represented?

Structurally, it was, I would say, certainly a Leninist structured party. I'm not sure whose influence that was, it may have been Padmore's. But it was beautifully structured. In fact, I think, it is one of the best parties in Africa. It went right through, and the whole business of democratic centralism--they had it in structure. But there was an important difference, and this is where Nkrumah's whole perception of what he was about comes in. At the start, before I got there, the central committee was elected from the body below it. And, at one stage they had a congress (I wasn't there) and the really leftwing and sort of ultra left people were going to vote out the Central Committee and vote in the new, younger left wing people and so on. And

Nkrumah decided that there would be no elections to the Central Committee, and that all that would happen is that he would select the Central Committee. So, up until the time he was overthrown, the Central Committee was selected and handpicked by him. The democratic process, one could say, was cut off at that point. That was an interesting thing. I don't know if it made a great deal of difference actually, but the Central Committee was never elected. It was always selected by Nkrumah. His own style varied, at least it changed I should say, because at the very beginning he was a very outgoing kind of politician. In fact, his strength depended on the ease with which he went into the districts without any security and so on. But it should be remembered that right from the beginning there were attempts to get him out violently. And this is very often forgotten when people talk about Nkrumah. You see there was a large trial, for instance, of people who were obviously preparing a coup d'etat and this took place before he became President. While he still had a governor general and so on. The reaction developed much stronger and became a very serious threat to him, but he still was visible and then there was an assassination attempt in a place called Kulungugu (in northern Ghana) and this must have been in 1961 or 1962 (August 1, 1962). He was injured and that immediately brought his retreat. One didn't see him again except on very, very formal occasions and with very, very heavy security. One of the jokes about that situation is that, you see, he was called "Osagyefo". That was the name that was given to him which means the man who has come to save us. Something like that. It was said that it was a woman in a village who was complaining that all she could hear about was Osagyefo and all that she knew was Nkrumah and where was the Nkrumah? So he hadn't even

reached that village as Osagyefo, you know, the two things coming together. That was characteristic, I would think, of Ghana as a whole. The ordinary people never got the kinds of messages that he wanted to convey and part of that was because the people he was working with were not particularly reliable. They were very good at getting their own comforts and so on, but not very good at conveying the ideas and the motivation that he wanted.

Let me ask a very pointed question with regard to his ideological and political stand. Was it scientific socialism guided by Marxism? or what was it?

No, I would say not. You can't put it like that. Nkrumah was a very, very eclectic man. I myself do not believe that he had enough training, but I'm not going to go into the details of what I mean by training. But, he went back to the Gold Coast, was sent back to the Gold Coast, in order to arrange another Pan-African conference. You see he had been at the Pan-African conference in Manchester (England), and he was invited to be the secretary of the UGCC. And the boys in London felt that here was a good opportunity for somebody to go there and work there, then set up this new Pan-African conference. And what happened is that Nkrumah went back and in a very short time he saw that he could take Ghana alone in the direction of independence and he concentrated on that, so that his whole approach was simply to get rid of the Englishmen. He said, for instance, that he was a Christian socialist or a Christian Marxist at certain times. But during his early time, I could not maintain that he was a scientific socialist or a marxist; he was a nationalist. But his difference from other nationalists was that he was quite willing to have Marxist, scientific socialists, working with him and helping to train the cadres and so on. But his own philosophy, whatever it was, was not, in my view, scientific socialism.

What then would you call his point of view? In the United States some people are using the expression Nkrumahism as a way to identify a body of work, collection of beliefs, and in some sense, a coherent and systematic set of beliefs, political views. How would you respond to this?

Well, we have a little trouble with this word Nkrumahism in Ghana itself. It was invented by a couple of journalists, but if you are going to talk about Nkrumahism at all, certainly during his time--what it is really around, what it is really concerned with was the unity of Africa. That was the real thrust of Nkrumah's policy or philosophy, that Africa should be united and from it should flow certain things like . . . and so on and so forth. In terms of a coherent ordered body of doctrine, during Nkrumah's time, I am not talking about when he went to Guinea, because a lot of things developed there, but up to 1966, I don't think that there was what we could call a philosophically coherent system that came out of him. There were bits of Marxism here and there, bits of Fabianism and so on, you know. Very, very mixed up. The main stress that he had after he had gotten rid of the British was to unite Africa--that is putting it very simply. It is easier for me to understand it simply.

The period of time when he was in Conakry, Guinea he produced a number of volumes, and attempted to maintain some working relationship with the world-wide network of forces that he had been in touch with and then working with prior to the coup. How do you see this period in his development and what impact did it have on Ghana?

There's an interesting period and I don't know it very well because I haven't read all the books that were produced there, but I think he got to the point of making the decision, it seems to me, that some form of Marxism was the only way in which Africa could be liberated. It seems to me, that that is what he was doing there and he got a lot of support from people that he would probably not have paid much attention to if they had come to see him in Ghana. It is a very curious thing. Some of the people who helped him in Conakry were working with him in Ghana, but they were never able to get him to produce that kind of work so

that he had to get out of the situation to realize that there was no possibility of going back in before this new sort of philosophical vision, if you want to call it that, of a Marxist approach to the problems of Africa arose. One does doubt whether he would have arrived at that in Ghana if he had still been in power in Ghana. I'll tell you an interesting thing, at a certain stage where things were getting rather bad with economics and so on, we came to the conclusion, some of us came to the conclusion, that what should be done was for Nkrumah to appoint a prime minister and that he, himself, go into the hills where he had a nice house and be the sort of eminent philosopher for Africa--all that business of getting people together and so on operate at that level and not at the day-to-day level of running the country. He agreed with that. Unfortunately, the person that was chosen blew the plan too early and Nkrumah himself had to drop it, you know. But I think that if he had a prime minister who would deal with the day-to-day things and take the day-to-day knocks at least he would not have been overthrown. That was my conception of things. But to say that he would have become Marxist in a thoroughgoing sense is to me very doubtful if he had been in power. It means a lot of discipline in Africa for a man to be as disciplined as a Marxist, because there are so many sources at work in the society itself--the way the society is structured; that a decision taken today is overturned tonight because somebody's sister has company and so on. It is a very difficult thing and the few people who have stood out must be extremely disciplined. I suppose Sekou Touré is one of those.

I think that one of the important points of looking at historical figures is not simply to understand them in their own context, although that's obviously the starting point; but one does it for lessons that one can use now as we move into the future. So, what can we learn from Nkrumah today? What remains as being important for us to remember?

I think, if one wants to take stages, I think that the organization of the party is not only something to remember, it's still being done. I mean the present party is organized, the present party which is the government of Ghana, is organized exactly on the same principles that Nkrumah used and they have won. He was an excellent organizer. No question at all about that. But apart from that, and one is leaving aside his character and things, I think that his vision of Africa remains as something that we should always consider. The vision of African-unity-which-he-did-not-get-down-into-any-detail,-at-least,-I haven't seen any writings of his that goes into any detail about it, but the necessity for it and the fact that it would release the economic and social forces in Africa. I think that very few people have had-- very few African leaders have had that concept of the whole of Africa united. That seems to me to be the legacy of Nkrumah.

What is your impression of how important Nkrumah is today for the way in which African liberation seems to be progressing? That is to say, not so much on a continent-wide basis, but country by country--Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe? What is the importance of Nkrumah for current political developments in Africa?

Well, I don't know. I think that at the discrete stage, you know, country-to-country and so on, and what to do next, that kind of thing-- there's a lot to be learned from what happened to Nkrumah and the kind of mistakes he made and the hundreds of mistakes that were made in his name. That's a very important aspect of it. But my own feeling is that in terms of liberation, I look ahead at liberation and we have to be very doubtful, it has to be a matter of considerable doubt whether without armed struggle, we can really lay a basis for liberation anywhere. And armed struggle was not at that time a part of Nkrumah's book at all. I think we are learning from Angola, Mozambique, and the people in the Sahel area, you know and Guinea-Bissau and so on that there must be armed struggle and it's particularly relevant in Africa, because

it assists in getting to the next stage beyond tribalism.

Well, that's an interesting point, because one of the important lessons of Marxism is that there are universal aspects of the human experience and societal development, not exact replicas one society to the next, but general logic and pattern of human society and so forth as well as (that's the general level) as well as the particularity. Now in Africa, often people who say they're socialist argue for the particularity of socialism in Africa--even talk about traditional Africa as being Socialist and that Marx and Engels simply discovered ideas that Africans had known all along. What would be your commentary on this sort of thing particularly as it relates to your experiences in Ghana?

Well, I disagree. I disagree.

Did you hear his view on Africa?

Oh yes, very strongly, very strongly. And even at the personal level, it is largely produced by people who did not want things to change and who were not prepared to accept the inevitable change of moving from a capitalist colonial system to a system that is based on the redistribution and so on and so forth--who did not want that change, and so they argued backwards that in the tribal situation you have socialism. I don't accept that at all.

Why?

Well, it isn't socialism. In fact, it is a high degree of autocracy that you are dealing with. If, I limit myself to Ghana, if you take a chieftain system which on the face of it looks beautiful because the chief, once he has been elected, he can be removed at any time by the masses of the people getting together and putting up de-stoolment charges and so on. But when you look closer at it, the chief is not appointed by the masses of the people. He is appointed by a very small select group and they are the only king makers. So that it is basically an autocratic system and the fealty that they have to do and so on really throws it back into the middle ages. So that I don't accept that. I may be wrong you know, but I don't accept that that is a form of Marxism. Not at all.

What do you think about the expression African socialism or even Nkrumah's earlier expression about the African personality made things different than anywhere else in the world?

Yes, well I expect that in terms of the modus and the style--even the general approach to life and death, all the rites of passage, have a particular meaning in Africa, but none of those things are the development of society to capitalism. You see you cannot escape capitalism by going back and saying that the traditional rites of passage are beautiful when what you are concerned with and what is destroying this same right of passage is capitalism. There is no way in which you can escape that.

What do you think about the idea that capitalism is white, capitalism is Europe, and therefore, to get rid of the white man is simultaneously to get rid of his system?

Oh, no, not at all. Not at all. It's a class matter and, black or white, it is still a class matter. They got rid of the white man in Ghana and so on; they still have capitalism which is run by Africans. It may be true that one of the problems in Africa is that it isn't easy to see the class structure. It isn't easy to see the class confrontation and so on. Because again, in a developmental sense, they are rather backward. But the same capitalist system is operating and while the white man has gone, his capitalism is there and it is operated with his help and with his getting profits as well by Black people in Africa. I don't think that having got rid of the white man, yes, a whole lot of things were liberated, but it did not go far enough in Nkrumah's Ghana. It did not go far enough. Capitalists were still there and everything was still organized and that and, you see, you run into the whole business, for instance, of the market woman.

The who?

The market woman, the market woman in Accra, who was actually a great supporter of Nkrumah, but her whole life is based on trading and that's

another thing altogether now. But it is based on trading in the capitalist system. And the capitalist system continues to exist so that she could continue to make, in fact, millions. Although you would not find her "in society," that is not what happens to an African. While an African makes millions, he is still going to eat his Fu-Fu and snail, for example. He's not going to eat . . .

Would this woman send her son or daughter to Oxford or Cambridge?

She would and she would send her boyfriends and so on to Oxford or Cambridge, but she would still be pounding her Fu-Fu every day. That didn't change her lifestyle. I mean, that is a fact. Her relationship to money and the exploitation that she was involved in is the key thing to look at, and so, if we are talking about exploitation, then there is a mass of exploitation involved, not just in Ghana, but in the whole of Africa by Africans. And if only to liberate the forces that are meaningful in human terms, imagine, you have to get rid of the exploitation.

Let me pick up a previous theme. I know that you had, as you explained, some relationship to the university.

Yes, I was at the university.

How did the struggle of one set of ideas versus another set of ideas, or political loyalties, or world view, how did that unfold inside higher education in Ghana?

Well, the point is that--take the University of Ghana at Legon for example--all the Africans there, with a few exceptions, were trained at Oxford and Cambridge. They were highly selected and, so far as their European experience is concerned, they are totally reactionary. There is no question at all about that. They developed a very interesting class association in relationship to people from other universities.

Do you mean other universities in Ghana?

No, overseas. And they were not prepared to accept Nkrumah who was not educated at Oxford or Cambridge and that is the kind of basis on which

they will argue. They supported Busia who was an Oxford man. They supported Danquah who was a London man with a Ph.D., but they took the same attitudes toward socialism and Marxism that they had learned in Oxford and Cambridge. I'm not saying that everybody who goes to Oxford and Cambridge refuses to believe in Marxism, that is not in fact true, but in the case of the University of Ghana, that is what happened. So that the kind of struggle, not really a struggle among the lecturers themselves, except for one or two who they accepted as their academic equals and who were leftwing Marxists or Communists; so that a debate took place there.

It was a debate . . .

It was within the structure. A perfect example of what happened was that again Nkrumah in the mid 60's started getting lecturers in the university from eastern Europe, Poland and so on. They came, some of them in Economics, and they taught Marxism which was rejected by the students, which was very, very interesting. But they were there and when he was overthrown in 1966, within a matter of a day or two a list of people to be deported was presented to the National Liberation Council and all those chaps were on it. This list was presented by the body of the lecturers, professors in the University.

In other words all the left wing people . . .

Were moved out. One or two managed to stay on.

Anybody in particular?

Well, I managed to stay on in a very curious way but I don't want to go into it.

What about students? What about the party? Where was the cutting edge of Nkrumah's politics? In other words, if they didn't acknowledge Nkrumah or they didn't accept him, but I'm sure Nkrumah tried to penetrate the campus in some way.

Yes, and you see people like that who are really basically insecure, I

think, were very amenable to flattery and good posts and so on. And Nkrumah would appoint them to important posts which they would accept and big jobs which they would accept. But at the same time, whenever they were in a position to argue they would argue against everything to do with Nkrumah even though themselves, some of them, even lectured to the Party. And immediately after the lecture, one chap lectured in December, and by February he was carrying the flag of the National Liberation Council. But Nkrumah didn't get very far in the University of Ghana at Legon. He had one man named William Abraham, but Willie was not a socialist. In fact he is now a Catholic priest, but he was, in a general sense, progressive and Nkrumah used him.

The image of Ghana for Blacks in the United States was very important as you indicated, it was the first Black African country to achieve independence--what we had perceived as freedom and Afro-Americans came to play an important role in Ghana. What was your perception of them? What role did they play? How important was that link up?

Well, that was very important and the reason for it actually was Nkrumah, because of Nkrumah's training in America, he had a very good perception of what the Afro-American was able to do. He had a number of them working with him. Some of them have actually remained in Ghana. The Afro-American varied, you know, the Afro-American, like the West Indian who came, varied considerably, because, I think, as a result of the industrial society in America. They found it difficult to adjust to no plumbing, the lights are not working and so on, you know? And some of them got very irritated about that. But other people who stayed and who worked very hard, people like Julian Mayfield is an excellent person and Lester Lacey. Those are people who immediately cottoned on to what was going on and to what the rhythm was and they did a lot of very helpful service. They all left in one way or the other after Nkrumah was overthrown. But at another sort of academic level, you had DuBois and

you had Alpheus Hunter who again adjusted. Even at DuBois' age, he learned to adjust. They laid down the foundation for the African encyclopedia which is well on its way now. There are other people running it, and it will soon come out.

The vision of Nkrumah, the vision of DuBois, and many others has often been summed up in the concept Pan-Africanism. On the other hand, the left, Marxists, have often been at odds with this concept of Pan-Africanism to the extent that it blurs class realities and so forth. In your own mind, in your perception of Africa as it moves into the new decade of the 80's, how do these two apparently conflicting sets of ideas come together, or these two conflicting movements come together?

Well, I don't know for sure, but I think the more modern, that is to say since 1939 let us say, the more modern Pan-Africanist developments could be said to have a very strong input of Trotskyism and I suspect that Marxists of the orthodox left have a problem with that, you know. A very important book that was written by George Padmore--the title was Pan-Africanism or Communism, in which he sets out two separate things. I am not sure that he sets it out very clearly. I mean I don't know, but that, as an ideological stance, I can understand because of the variety of people and ideologies that got into Pan-Africanism and are still in Pan-Africanism today. Because you have Marxists, you have Trotskyists, you have Nationalists, and you actually have a lot of bourgeois capitalist people who are all supporting Pan-Africanism. I am not really sure that we shouldn't look on Pan-Africanism and look at the last real conference on Pan-Africanism, which was the Manchester Conference that was dedicated to the overthrow of colonialism. I have read the proceedings of that conference and that seemed to me to be the end of Pan-Africanism. I may be quite wrong about that, I don't know whose toes I'm stepping on and so on. But from there the next thing was for African countries to become independent and throw off colonialism and then for African countries to unite. Now, if you

are talking about Pan-Africanism on that basis, there is nothing, it seems to me, that prevents it from being Marxist. But I have some difficulties with the ideological spread, the enormous ideological spread that is evident in Pan-Africanism. And I suspect that there are Africans who have the same problem.

Perhaps you can say something about the role of West Indians in . . .

The role of West Indians is very, very doubtful. As leaders and so on, they did not emerge. I'm talking about my own contemporaries. They taught in schools for three years and then they left and so on. I think that largely they made a better adjustment because they were coming to a country that had been colonial in the strict sense of the word and they were not themselves in their own background related to the high levels of technology of America or whatever and so on. They seemed to make a better adjustment. One or two of them stood out. There was obviously Padmore and Ras Makonnen, who is from Grenada. There was a man named Morris who was Nkrumah's press secretary for a long time. They stood out, but they stood out entirely in relationship to Nkrumah, ~~himself--the person.~~ A number of the Africans were hostile, ~~very hostile to the West Indians.~~

Why?

Primarily because they are not Africans. You see, it is very difficult to realize this but (the Ghanaians are very nice people) but they have different expressions--one is "obroni". Now, obroni, that really means a man from a different culture and they have another word which means a man from our culture. We had felt that the one who was called obroni was a white man, until it was pointed out to me that "you are obroni!". It has nothing to do with skin color.

How did you feel about that?

Well, I was very amazed actually. Because, you see, I had just, at that point in the conversation, been attacking the obroni. But there is a cultural difference and it takes a great deal and it takes a long time for you to be accepted as African in the traditional sense. It takes a long time for that. I mean you have to have ten years there living with the people, and I'm afraid that my friends were not doing that, Padmore, Morris, etc. They were living as West Indians, and that caused the more traditional people, not the people working in the government, the more traditional people wanted to know why Nkrumah was bringing all these obroni to work in Ghana when "we are here."

Let's see, now, you were in Ghana for what period?

From 1955 to 1970, about 15 years.

What changes occurred in the day-to-day lives of the workers and peasants of Ghana during this period?

Well, at a certain stage, when the economics were better, we got better paid and they had a greater sense of dignity. I'm sure about that. Largely through the Party, the CPP, they had a sense of themselves as important people in the community. But that is not a difficult thing to do once you have created certain symbols. For example, Nkrumah wore a smock from the north; and he made that a Party symbol, because the people of the north were really the lowest in the whole hierarchy. They're the people who did all the dirty work, and they wore these smocks. And so, he took that symbol and made it a Party symbol and everybody wore a smock. That helped to raise the level of consciousness, to a certain degree, of the working class. I think that that is the main thing; that's the only thing I can think of at the moment; giving them a sense of their importance. Although, again you get back into

the traditional thing and the problem of class. There is no overt class system, for example, in the family and the family is an enormous group. For example, I know of judges, when you go and visit everything is very British, and a man comes in not looking particularly tidy, and he takes a seat and he celebrates and it turns out that that man is the judge's brother in some distant relation. So that, you know, if you take in Jamaica, it would be very difficult to find a judge entertaining a laborer who is his brother. So that remains until the family system is broken-up, that remains as a fact that the family system allows the cutting across of economic class. All I can do is to describe it.

Didn't Ghana experience a radical change in its educational system and can't we attribute that to Nkrumah?

Certainly, yes. Certainly. Not only that, he also made it possible for all working class people to become educated, to a large degree that was his doing. There was a man who worked with him, the Minister of Education, who was really responsible for restructuring the whole educational system and up to the time that he left Ghana, that is Nkrumah, university education was free, but it has been changed now. I think they have to pay something now. He also used the money that Ghana had, cocoa money, in sending people abroad to be trained, and these were the people from really working class backgrounds. He did a lot of that.

You're a novelist, and I understand that you're currently writing a novel about Ghana. -Could you tell us something about your new novel?

Well, it is very difficult for me. In fact, I prefer not to speak about what I'm writing. It's a kind of professional quirk that I have. What it is going to do is to summarize my experience over the 15 years and there are details in it that are delightful, because Ghana is a really delightful country, they're a delightful people. There's no question

about it, truly a delightful people. But I introduce into it three people: one is a West Indian, one is an Afro-American, and one is a Latin American. I'm not going to tell you what their ideologies were, or ~~are~~, but they operate in that setting. So that the vision that you get is not an attempt to write about Ghana from the Ghanaian point of view. I can't do that. That has to be done by a Ghanaian. But there are three people who had what we could generally call a colonial experience. They are introduced to an area where there is a colonial experience, or was a colonial experience, and they are observing and experiencing this experience in Ghana. This is the main purpose of the book. It is amusing as well.