



A REVIEW OF KWAME NKRUMAH'S *CONSCIENCISM*

Arinze Agbanusi (Ph.D)
Department of Philosophy
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
08030842070
arinzeagbanusi1@gmail.com
ac.agbanusi@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract: *As suggested in the title, this work reviews Kwame Nkrumah's major political work, Consciencism, with a view to playing up the major elements contained therein. There are two major parts of the work. The first part is the exposition of the entire book - chapter by chapter, while the second part is a critique of it. Part 1 has an introduction and the elucidation of the five chapters of the book. Chapter one is 'Philosophy in retrospect', Chapter two is 'Philosophy and Society', Chapter three is 'Society and Ideology' Chapter four is 'Consciencism' and Chapter five is 'Set theoretic terms'. The conclusion of this work is that the book is written in high intellectual language and has a praise-worthy mission as a work centred on the philosophy and ideology for the decolonization of Africa; however, the reviewer disagrees with Nkrumah's outright rejection of capitalism, despite the fact that capitalism engenders competition which is essential for progress. It is akin to throwing away the baby with the bathwater.*

Background

The book was first published in the United States of America by Monthly Review Press. Although the book is over forty years old now, certain reasons gave birth to the decision to do a review of it at this time. Firstly, considering the importance of the book to the emancipation of African culture and ideology, it can be argued that not enough attention has been given to the book over the years. This is more so now with the renewed interest in issues bothering on African development. Apart from the comparatively few commentators who did extensive commentaries on the book, some others either simply devoted one or two pages to it or just mentioned, in passing, some of the ideas expressed therein by Nkrumah, without an exposition of most other ideas and arguments in the book. For instance, in his book,



Knowing Philosophy, Joseph Omoregbe devoted only two pages to Nkrumah's *Consciencism* where he made analysis of few major themes in the book.¹

Moreover, certain socio-political experiences have affected some views hitherto held by socio-political observers and analysts. For instance, the collapse of socialism the world over is a phenomenon which has hampered the position of its proponents and advocates of which Kwame Nkrumah is one. The emergence of these new experiences or facts makes it pertinent that such affected works, even if old, be reviewed once more.

Besides, the upsurge in the occurrence of certain unpleasant phenomena in the African society of today betrays an urgent need for the review of works inclined to traditional African culture and ideology with a view to encouraging same. This is exemplified in the high rate of crime among African youths following bankruptcy in those values for which traditional Africa was known.

Part I: The exposition of the book

This 121-page book which centres on the philosophy and ideology for decolonization has an introduction and five chapters. Chapter one is titled 'Philosophy in retrospect', Chapter two is titled 'Philosophy and society', Chapter three is titled 'Society and ideology', Chapter four is titled 'Consciencism' while Chapter five is titled 'Set theoretic terms'.

Introduction

In the introduction of the book, Nkrumah laments that most young Africans were exposed to a system of education, which is founded on the ideology of the European colonized Africa. He holds that the

... lines of the partition of Africa naturally affected the education of the colonized Africans. Students from English-speaking territories went to Britain as a matter of course, just as those from French-speaking territories went to France as a matter of course. In this way, the yearning for formal education, which African students could only satisfy at great cost of effort, will, and sacrifice, was hemmed-in within the confines of the colonial system.²



He states that it was in an attempt to wriggle out of this colonial entanglement that a number of young Africans, including himself, tried to study in centres outside the metropolis of their administering power. Hence, he chose to study in America.

Nkrumah goes on to use this evaluation of his own social circumstance as part of the analysis of facts and events, which can serve as a good starting point for an inquiry into the relations between philosophy and society. The interest of philosophy in facts and events also brings to bear its relations with history. According to Nkrumah, "philosophy, like history, can come to enrich, indeed to define, the experience of man".³

While in the Universities of Lincoln and Pennsylvania, Nkrumah was introduced to the works of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx and other scholars to whom he preferred to refer to as 'university philosophers'. He observes that the works of these men are presented in such a way that they appear so sacrosanct that the 'colonial student' can be so reduced by those attempts to give a philosophical account of the universe, that he surrenders his whole personality to them. When this happens such a student loses sight of the fundamental social fact that he is a colonial subject. In this way, according to Nkrumah,

he (the colonial student) omits to draw from his education and from the concern displayed by the great philosophers for human problems, anything which he might relate to the very problem of colonial dominations, which, as it happens, conditions the immediate life of every colonized African.⁴

Nkrumah states further that by the time such a colonial student finishes his studies and comes home with his certificate, he no longer has the 'vital power', which he hitherto had for the struggle for decolonization. Those that had this experience because they had 'lost contact with their own roots', became prone to accepting any theory of universalism, provided it was expressed in vague, mellifluous or sweet sounding terms. Nkrumah notes that these scholars, armed with their universalism, imbibed in their university course an attitude entirely at variance with the concrete reality of their people and their struggle.



Nkrumah instead placed himself among 'the vast numbers of ordinary Africans, who, animated by a lively national consciousness, sought knowledge as an instrument of national emancipation and integrity'.

Chapter one: Philosophy in retrospect

Here, Nkrumah notes that just like philosophy can become perverted so can history be warped. He feels that this is the case with the history of Africa. This is so especially because the colonized African students are introduced very early to the history of Greece, Rome, and that of modern Europe and made to believe, as it were, that it is the only portion of the story of man which is worthwhile. However, Nkrumah's exposure to the works of Marx and Engel, enables him see them as veritable instruments with which colonialism can be fought.

Here, in retrospect, Nkrumah holds that the history of philosophy can be seen in diverse ways, including as a series of abstract systems. When philosophy is seen in this way, it can be said to concern itself with two fundamental questions. First, the question 'what there is'; second, the question how 'what there is' may be explained.

He holds that the postulation of water as the cosmic raw material by Thales, and the postulation of spirits and their ideas by Berkeley were in response to this first fundamental question of philosophy. In an attempt to address the second fundamental question of philosophy, Nkrumah starts by referring to the principle of sufficient reason which has it that everything has an explanation why it is as it is, and not otherwise. He then raises the question: Has the cosmic raw material a cause or explanation, or has it not?

According to him, to 'deem it not to have is to enter a plea of exception against the principle of sufficient reason. He makes a long logical analysis to show that whatever cause that is proposed for the cosmic raw material must be vexed by persistent problems. In his analysis, he raises the problem of whether the world is finite or infinite and concludes that it could be either way depending on human conception because, according to him, 'the finitude or infinitude of the world is logically incapable of experimental exposure'.⁶ However, he opts for the view that the universe or world (he uses the two words interchangeably) is infinite, and that implies that the universe could not have been caused because for a situation



to be coherently described as the causing or the causelessness of the world, in his words,

... it would have to be a situation in which the world could be placed. But any situation r can only be *a* situation, which is part of the world. The world can have no outside; and as it can have no outside it can have no cause. There can, therefore, be no 'material' grounds on which the adjectives, 'caused', 'uncaused,' or 'finite', 'infinite', can be descriptively applied to the universe.⁷

Just as in the case of whether the world is finite or infinite, Nkrumah sees the question of whether or not the world has an outside as dependent on the mode of conception. He sees the opposition here as strictly dialectical. This dialectics is intelligible in religion; for example, Christianity holds the view that there is an 'outside' of the world (where heaven is). Hence, it enjoins us to lay up treasures in heaven where moths do not corrupt. But for many African societies, there is no 'outside' of the world; even heaven is inside, not outside, the world. According to Nkrumah:

...the recognition of this kind of contradiction and the use to which it might be put in the exploitation of workers...impelled Marx to criticize religion as an instrument of exploitation....⁸

By and large, Nkrumah holds that, in present day Africa, the recognition of this dialectical contradiction between the 'inside' and 'outside' has much to contribute to the process of decolonization and development because it helps us to anticipate colonialist and imperialist devices for furthering exploitation by diverting our energies from secular concerns. In the later part of the chapter, Nkrumah tries also to distinguish between idealism and materialism and between rationalism and empiricism.



Chapter two: Philosophy and society

In this chapter, Nkrumah discusses how philosophy relates to society and how the interest of philosophy in the various developmental periods in the history of philosophy had always related with the various changes in social concerns. For instance, Thales' intellectual predecessors had involved supernature (the gods) in order to explain nature. The early Greeks had a religion, which was distinguished for its lack of an established creed. The Greek priests enjoyed the then prevailing political power until Thales' 'rational revolution'. The second revolution of Thales was his contention that the unity of nature consisted, not in its being, but in its materiality. Thales' choice of one substance in his monism is seen by Nkrumah as having its roots in mercantilism, in the belief that all goods were exchangeable in terms of a common denominator. Also, Thales' choice of water as this common denominator is seen as a reflection of the dependence of Ionia on its navy for mercantilism.

Nkrumah goes on to present an extensive discussion on how society has been greatly affected by the contributions of philosophers in the various epochs of the history of philosophy. In his analysis, reference was made to the philosophical ideas of many philosophers including Anaximander, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, J.S. Mill, John Locke, Berkeley, Descartes, Leibniz and Malebranche.

By and large, in this chapter, Nkrumah tries to show that philosophy usually arises from a social milieu, and that a social contention is always in it either explicitly or implicitly. In other words, he tries to show that social milieu affects the content of philosophy, and that the content of philosophy seeks to affect social milieu, either by confirming it or by opposing it.

Chapter three: Society and ideology

In this chapter, Nkrumah discusses the relationship between society and ideology. He agrees with Mazzini who, in an attempt to make a link between a revolution and an ideology, states that when a revolution has successfully taken place, an ideology emerges to characterize the society. In other words, it is the ideology which gives a countenance to the ensuring social milieu. Nkrumah asserts that in every society, there is at least one militant segment, which is the dominant segment of that society. It is this dominant segment that determines the ideology of the society. Thus, in every society, there is an ideology.



In communalistic societies, the dominant segment coincides with the whole. This segment, according to Nkrumah,

...has its fundamental principles, its beliefs about the nature of man, and the type of society which must be created for man. ⁹

Nkrumah also asserts that an ideology seeks to bring a specific order into the total life of its society and that, to achieve this, it needs to employ a number of instruments. These instruments include political theory, social theory and moral theory through which the ideology of a society manifests. The ideology of a people embraces the whole life of the people and reveals itself in their class-structure, history, literature, art, and religion.

He further states that the instruments of ideology are instruments through which 'coercion' is achieved. In fact, he argues that 'coercion' can be seen as a fundamental idea in society. There are explicit and subtle methods through which 'coercion' is attained. Nkrumah cites, as an instance of the subtle method, the wrong presentation by European scholars, of the history of Africa. African history was presented as an extension of European history, dealing with their adventures. Hence, Nkrumah declares that in the

...new African renaissance, we place great emphasis on the presentation of history. Our history needs to be written as the history of our society, not as the story of European adventures. ¹⁰

Nkrumah states that there are, in every non-socialist society, two classes of people - the oppressor and the oppressed, the exploiter and the exploited. For him, the essential relation between the two strata is the same as that between masters and slaves, lords and serfs. He views capitalism as a refined form of feudalism, and feudalism as a refined form of slavery. In his words,



Capitalism is a development by refinement from feudalism, just as feudalism is a development by refinement from slavery.....¹¹

Nkrumah claims that originally, communalism was practised in human society generally. Everything, including land, was communally owned until suddenly some people began to claim ownership of private property. Inequality and class struggle eventually emerged, leading to the disappearance of communalism. The bourgeois propounded their theory that the essence of establishing government is to protect the property of citizens and the private ownership of the means of production. But actually, the purpose of establishing government is to protect the interest of the bourgeois and to constitute a means for the exploitation of the lower class. Liberalism, individualism, elitism, fascism, imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism are products of the bourgeois ideology.

Nkrumah's rejection of capitalism is based on the belief that in it, the working class who, by their toil, produce the wealth of the society is distinct from those who enjoy the fruits of productivity. This is a social contradiction and actually contradicts the logic which was operational in traditional African society.

The evil of capitalism consists in its alienation of the fruit of labour from those who with the toil of their body and the sweat of their brow produce this fruit. This aspect of capitalism makes it irreconcilable with those principles, which animate the traditional African society. ¹²

Traditional African society, Nkrumah insists, is egalitarian and communalistic. Capitalism is alien to it and must be rejected by Africans with its concomitant exploitation and individualism. He admonishes African nations to revert to the egalitarianism and communalism of traditional African society. However, they have to adopt socialism, which is the developed form of communalism. Communalism is the socio-political ancestor of socialism. Socialism shares the same attributes with communalism. Just as capitalism is linked with feudalism and slavery, so is socialism linked with communalism. Communalism thrived in the traditional African setting because it was an 'untechnical society'; if the underlying principles of communalism are not given centralised and correlated expression, economic disparities and the concomitant political inequalities will arise, and in turn, give



rise to class cleavages. Socialism is, therefore, the defender of the principles of communalism in a modern setting. Nkrumah defines socialism as 'a form of social organisation which, guided by the principles underlying communalism, adopts procedures and measures made necessary by demographic and technological developments.'¹³ Hence, by adopting socialism, African nations would not only be going back to their roots but would be adopting a developed form of it. To establish this socialism, he calls for a radical transformation of the society through revolution.

Chapter four: Consciencism

"Practice without thought is blind; thought without practice is empty". This is the first statement Nkrumah makes in this chapter, and it also forms the basis of his discussion therein. It constitutes the sufficient reason for the need for the socialist revolution to be based on a certain philosophy, which will be its foundation and guiding principle. This philosophy, Nkrumah refers to as "philosophical consciencism". Nkrumah sees consciencism as

... the map in intellectual terms of the disposition of forces which will enable African society to digest the Western and the Islamic and the Euro-Christian elements in Africa, and develop them in such a way that they fit into the African personality.¹⁴

Philosophical consciencism has its basis on materialism, but this is not the materialism which denies the existence of immaterial or spiritual realities. Nkrumah's materialism or the materialism of 'philosophical consciencism' accepts the existence of spiritual elements but insists on the primacy of matter. Matter contains within itself tension, and it is through this dialectical tension, which is inherent in matter that spiritual realities develop. Nkrumah refers to this process through which one kind of being develops from another as 'categorical conversion'. Categorical conversion is produced through the dialectical tension or conflict, which is a natural constituent of matter.

For Nkrumah, tension, conflict strife, and struggle are the laws of progress and development. Becoming is tension and being is the child of that tension of opposed forces and tendencies. The categorical conversion takes place in human societies through radical revolutions and this is the only way through which socialism can



emerge from capitalism. The transformation of capitalism into socialism will spell social development and progress.

Chapter five: Set theoretic terms

In this chapter, Nkrumah presents very rigorous symbolic proofs to support some of his major postulations. He used the set theoretic method to try to prove the need for the establishment of a union of independent African states, a union integrated by socialism, 'without which our hard-won independence may yet be perverted and negated by a new colonialism'.¹⁵

Part II: A Critique of the book

The book is written in a very articulate language and the author reflects in it a high level of mental capacity. The orderly presentation of ideas, the systematic development of the ideas, the consistency and rigorous reasoning involved in the presentation of long arguments and the unique blending of these with impeccable English, portray the author as a rare gem in the academic universe.

The literary artistry exhibited in the book betrays a high level of intellectual power. The author's references to the works of many philosophers and the adequacy of the works in their places of introduction into the book reveal a great deal of mastery of philosophy and its history. His symbolic articulation of his views in the last chapter of the book is not just a suggestion; it is a confirmation that the author is very much at home with symbolic logic.

However, as is the case with most (if not all) philosophical works, consciencism has got some weaknesses. They include:

1. Rejection of capitalism

Nkrumah sees capitalism as a refined form of feudalism, and feudalism as a refined form of slavery. By syllogistic inference, capitalism is, for Nkrumah, a refined form of slavery. His rejection of it is founded on the belief that it harbours exploitative tendencies directed against the working class.



The author's outright rejection of capitalism is erroneous because capitalism has within itself an essential ingredient for progress, and that is the spirit of competition. It is acceptable, like, Nkrumah notes, that there is some kind of tension inherent in capitalism. However, the inherent tension in capitalism is not capable of producing socialism as an offshoot. The tension in question is that which usually exists between employers and employees in the negotiation of labour. This tension eventually has its resolution in the labour agreement between the employer and the employee. Hence, the 'being' which results from this dialectics, is that labour agreement and the resultant production of goods and services. This is what actually leads to progress.

2. The impossibility of a classless society

The dream about a society without class-structure does not seem realizable from the consideration of human nature. There is no equality in nature. All fingers, they say, are not equal. Same is the case with social classes. Once there is ownership of private property, there must be class-structure and once there is class-structure, there must be competition. These things are social facts.

3. The question of originality

A question can be raised about the originality of the book, *Consciencism*. This is because it is replete with Marxist ideas. Besides, like Karl Marx's philosophy, *Consciencism* smacks of philosophical ideas known to have originated from some past philosophers. These include: the idea of Heraclitus that conflict or strife is the very condition of life; the materialism of Democritus and Epicurus; Francis Bacon's emphasis on science as a means of conquering and controlling nature; Kant's ethical principle that human beings should not be used simply as means to ends; Feuerbach's idea that religion is man's self-alienation; Hegel's theory of master-slave relationship, his idea of alienation, his dialectics and his teleological view of history. In fact, Nkrumah admits that his '...principle of identity of meaning is akin to Leibniz's principle of identity of meaning and to Frege's principle of identity of meaning'.¹⁶ Anyway, the author may be excused from the gamut of accusations leveled against Marx with respect to non-originality since his mission in the book is the employment of the works of Marx and Engel as instruments to push the course of African development by extricating Africa from the shackles of neo-colonialism which Nkrumah says is worse than colonialism.



In any case, even at that, *Consciencism* contains a lot of original elements and the author sometimes disagrees with Marx on some issues. For instance, unlike Marx who denies the existence of spiritual elements, Nkrumah tolerates their existence even though he places primacy on matter.

Conclusion

The book has a praise-worthy mission as a work centred on the philosophy and ideology for decolonization of Africa. The high academic prowess exhibited by the author is also very commendable. However, the complete rejection of capitalism by Nkrumah makes the book bereft of an essential element and thus renders his 'socialism' impracticable. The failure of socialism the world over lends credence to this position.

References

1. Joseph Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy*, (Lagos, Nigeria: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 1990) pp. 31-33.
2. Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism* (America: Monthly Review Press) pp. 1-2.
3. Ibid, p.2.
4. Ibid, p.3.
5. Ibid, p.4.
6. Ibid, p.11.
7. Ibid, p.11.
8. Ibid, p.12.
9. Ibid, p.57.
10. Ibid, p.63.
11. Ibid, p.72.
12. Ibid, p.76.
13. Ibid, p.73.
14. Ibid, p.79.
15. Ibid, p.118.
16. Ibid, p.80.



Bibliography

- Alarape, A. 'Obasanjo Million Times Worse Than Abacha' *Daily Sun Newspapers*, June 13, 2008.
- Azikiwe, N. *Ideology for Nigeria: Capitalism, Socialism or Welfarism*, Lagos: Macmillan Nigeria Publishers Ltd., 1979.
- Bamidele, J. The Making of a Tyrant' in *The News Magazine*, April 17, 2006.
- Carnoy, M. *The State and Political Theory*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Dicey, A.V. *Introduction to the study of the law of the Constitution*, 1939.
- Engels, F. *The origin of the Family, private property and the state*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972.
- Entreves, A.P.D. *Natural Law* London: Hutchinson, 1970.
- Gauba, O.P. *An introduction to political theory* 4th ed, New Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd., 1981.
- Laski, H.J. *The state in the Theory and practice*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1935.
- Lenin, V.I. *The state and revolution*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969.
- Maier, Karl. *This House has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis*, London: Penguin Books, 2000.
- Miliband, R. *The State in Capitalist Society: The Analysis of western system of power*, London: Quartet Books. 1969.
- Nkrumah, K. *Consciencism, America: Monthly Review Press*, 1970.
- Nyerere, J. *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Omoregbe, Joseph. *Knowing Philosophy*, Lagos, Nigeria: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 1990.
- Omoregbe, J. *A simplified History of western Philosophy*, vol. 1, Lagos: Joja Educational Research and publishers Ltd., 1991.
- Osa 'Unpresidential Hypocrisy' in *Insider Magazine*, No. 6, February 19, 2007.
- Ostheimer, J *Nigerian Politics*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973.
- Senghor, L.S. "What is Negritude?" in *Readings in African Political Thought* ed. by G.C. Mustoso, London: Heinemann, 1975.
- Ukwuoma, D. *Nigerian Political Leadership*, Onitsha: Royal Priesthood, International Ltd., 2007.