

BOOK REVIEW

Jeffrey S. Ahlman. *Living with Nkrumahism: Nation, State, and Pan-Africanism in Ghana*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017. ix + 305 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$32.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780821422922.

Living with Nkrumahism: Nation, State, and Pan-Africanism in Ghana by Jeffrey S. Ahlman examines Nkrumahism as a cohesive, contradictory, and changing ideology. It interrogates the different versions of Nkrumahism “as a philosophy of decolonization” (5) and the ways in which Nkrumahism intersected with everyday life within the shifting political, economic, and social environment inside and outside of Ghana from the 1950s to the mid-1960s. On the one hand, Nkrumahism was an amalgamation of ideas based on African socialism, global anti-imperialism, and African unity. On the other hand, Ahlman notes that Nkrumahism was also a set of ideas, practices, and policies that undergirded the plans of Kwame Nkrumah and the Convention People’s Party (CPP) to modernize and industrialize Ghana. Most importantly, however, Ahlman argues that Nkrumahism became a language with which Ghanaians and others debated the place of Ghana and Africa in the imagination of the post-independence international community.

Drawing on forty-four interviews and a number of newspaper and government records, Ahlman investigates the ways in which Ghanaians embraced, challenged, and shaped Nkrumahist ideas and practices. Ahlman asserts that the daily coverage and editorials of the newspapers often better reflected the dynamic nature of Nkrumahism than the speeches and writings of Nkrumah and other prominent CPP figures. He uses interviews with nonelite Ghanaian men and women who either participated in or opposed Nkrumah-era organizations, including the Ghana Young Pioneers and the Builders Brigade, to reveal how ordinary people influenced (and were influenced by) Nkrumahism.

The book is organized into six chapters, the first two of which tell a familiar story about the local and international environment and the networks that shaped Nkrumah’s own outlook as an anticolonial thinker and activist, and about the attempts of the CPP and Nkrumah to create a nation-state that was “modern, ordered, urban, industrial, and cosmopolitan” (51). Ahlman also details the ways in which the efforts of Nkrumah and his allies

ran counter to the interests of some groups and thus provoked resistance. For instance, the CPP's development plans to make Tema and Akosombo into Ghana's "new Industrial Triangle" threatened the indigenous Ga people's connections to their historical and spiritual roots and resulted in forced resettlements. Consequently, protests were persistent.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five focus on the ways in which non-elite actors experienced and made use of Nkrumahism, focusing on themes of citizenship, productivity, and the workplace. In Chapter Three, Ahlman contends that while the Builders Brigade Program was intended to address unemployment, especially among the youth, it also served as a vehicle to instill the government's vision of a post-independence citizen—one based on discipline, order, and state-guided activism—into those who participated. Ahlman also notes that the CPP-led state encouraged Brigade women to perform "seemingly masculine tasks—most notably, driving tractors," an approach that, he argues, effectively "defeminized female labor" (95). Some young people used their participation in the Brigade as a platform for upward mobility and socio-cultural development, translating the skills they learned into other occupations. As with other state projects, these efforts at transforming the individual ran into some resistance. Ahlman notes that while the Young Pioneers program was also intended to address issues such as laziness, sexual impropriety, and rudeness, some people felt that the government used the program to create a youth military wing and an avenue to spy on them.

Chapter Four examines the changing ideology of work. As Ghana's economy began to decline, especially with the fall of cocoa prices, the government sought to reorganize and control the workforce under the banner of "Work and Happiness for All" (147). While some people saw the government's attempt as further intrusion into their daily lives, others viewed it as a vehicle for advancing their ambitions, thus showing that Nkrumahism represented constant negotiation.

Chapter Five uses the Bureau of African Affairs to explore the daily work environments of Ghanaians, again highlighting the way that the experience of Nkrumahism often failed to match its ideals. Ahlman argues, for instance, that the CPP government's commitment to equality for all was frequently undermined by the daily sexism that women experienced. Ahlman notes that women's interests, including maternal leave and equal pay scales, were framed as "overt threats to national productivity, state and institutional security, and social and ideological discipline" (175). The final chapter focuses on the ways in which Ghanaians navigated the socio-political uncertainties in an increasingly authoritarian state during the early to mid-1960s, and how they understood their roles in nation-building and pan-African liberation.

Ahlman's important contributions lie within his compelling argument that Nkrumahism was not merely an ideological blueprint for nation-building; rather, it was an experience that became directly and deeply intertwined with the livelihoods of Ghanaians. This connection with daily life meant that ordinary Ghanaians became active participants in shaping

Nkrumahism by constantly re-evaluating and contesting their relationship with the state while also navigating the threats posed by Nkrumah's increasingly dictatorial rule. Ahlman generally approaches the "daily life" of Nkrumahism as revolving around the CPP's domestic agenda. Yet one defining feature of Nkrumahism was the way that it wove national transformation into the broader story of African liberation and anti-colonialism. It would be interesting to know more about how ordinary Ghanaians "lived with" the international aspects of the country's politics.

Ahlman's trenchant and insightful book will be of considerable interest to scholars of citizenship, decolonization, early post-independence nationalism, and pan-Africanism. Ahlman's work is suitable for both undergraduate and graduate audiences.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Hess, Janet. 2001. "Exhibiting Ghana: Display, Documentary, and 'National' Art in the Nkrumah Era." *African Studies Review* 44 (1): 59–77. doi:[10.2307/525392](https://doi.org/10.2307/525392).
- Mazrui, Ali A. 1995. "Pan-Africanism: From Poetry to Power." *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 23 (1): 35–38. doi:[10.1017/S0047160700009033](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047160700009033).