

Navigating Nkrumah's Theory of Neo-colonialism in the 21st Century

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Un-unified & Underdeveloped: Navigating Nkrumah's Theory of Neo-colonialism in the 21st Century

In *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president and arguably one of Africa's most influential political leaders, posits his theory concerning an emerging phenomenon he describes as "neo-colonialism." According to Nkrumah, the general aim of neo-colonialism is economic domination at the satisfaction of a few.[1] In the case of Africa, this manifests itself as imperialistic power without responsibility.[2] Neo-colonialism in its cruelest form is the continuation of colonial policies under the guise of achieving freedom.[3] African nations rely on their former imperial power or colonial "mother country" for defense and internal security. Imperialist nations advance their economic neo-colonial aspirations by various aid schemes under the guise of improving living standards and conditions. Meanwhile, such powers have little interest in developing the countries they aid or improving social aspects such as education.[4] Destructive military aid, rather than helpful multilateral aid, is often given due to competing imperialistic objectives from Western powers according to Nkrumah.[5] The end result is Africa's mass amounts of natural resources are utilized to develop external Western nations such as the United States, Western European countries, and Japan rather than their own economies. As African countries export and provide cheap raw materials to help imperialist powers industrialize, they simultaneously create spheres of influence while supplying such powers with a market for their expensive finished goods.

To combat this dangerous trend of neo-colonialism on the African continent, Nkrumah delves into several solutions. First and foremost, Nkrumah asserts that the concept of unity must be applied to the economic realm of both individual nations and the continent as a whole. Nkrumah declares, "Quite obviously, therefore, unity is the first requisite for destroying neo-colonialism." [6] Economic unity specifically requires re-organizing African countries to specialize in the production of crops and goods that they are most suited for.[7] It also lays the groundwork for unified agricultural, transportation, and communications policies.[8] From economic unity stems the principle of non-alignment, or not cooperating solely with capitalist, socialist, or mixed economies.[9] Instead, Nkrumah argues that careful national planning and investing with the country's interest in mind makes African countries the masters of their own destinies.[10] Secondly, Nkrumah speaks of political unity as a concept that must go hand in hand with economic unity: "When Africa becomes economically free and politically united...a new struggle will arise within which the liquidation and collapse of imperialism will be complete." [11] Nkrumah also declares, "Economic unity to be effective must be accompanied by political unity. The two are inseparable, each necessary for the future greatness of our continent, and the full development of our resources." [12]

This quest for a unified Africa to eradicate the continent of the ills of neo-colonialism that Nkrumah passionately writes about in 1965 begs the question, how successful have national and continental economic planning initiatives such as the African Development Bank (which Nkrumah applauds in his book following its establishment in September 1964) been in the 21st century? [13] Do organizations such as the African Union exemplify Nkrumah's hopes of a politically unified continent? For the most part, large-scale attempts at economic and political unification in Africa have failed in modern times due to an insistence on implementing policies according to Western ideologies and notions of development rather than philosophies that benefit Africa.

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The African Development Bank (AfDB), as Nkrumah explains, originated with the goal of developing an international code to govern foreign investment, increase African economic development and social progress, and promote carefully regulated private capital investment amongst member states.[14] In recent years, the ADB has received very little attention as an organization originally designed to "...finance activities that help reduce poverty and promote sustainable development." [15] Instead of operating as an independent body that utilizes economic principles that benefit Africa, the AfDB works closely with the World Bank and the European Union through co-financing to promote "trade & investment liberalization" as well as "privatization" of state owned companies.[16] Such neo-liberal concepts paved the way towards neo-colonialism, as Nkrumah warns. Additionally, reports such as *Examining the African Development Bank: A Primer for NGOs* by the Bank Information Center state "...the AfDB has not done a good job of putting its policies into practice, partly because of the lack of financial and human resources it devotes to policy implementation." [17] The report also asserts, "The AfDB is struggling to define its priority lending areas and determine its "comparative advantage" vis-à-vis the World Bank and other donors." [18] The AfDB is responsible for only 6% of overall assistance to Africa because it "lacks the financial resources, the staff capacity and the range of staff skills and experience of the World Bank." [19] As a result, the AfDB closed all field offices in 1995 and now has little influence past its headquarters in Cote d'Ivoire or Tunisia.[20] As *Africa's Failed Economic Development Trajectory: A Critique* by Franklin Obeng-Odoom suggests, the AfDB is after unification based on a globally accepted view on development that defines economic growth in terms that exclude important African economic features such as the number of women in the informal labor force.[21] In essence, the AfDB has largely failed as a tool to promote economic unity throughout Africa as Nkrumah had hoped during its inception. Instead, the AfDB serves as yet another instrument of what Nkrumah terms, "Western ideological warfare" by advancing ideological notions of neo-liberalism that hamper unification efforts.[22]

Another area in which unification has failed is the case of the African Union. The BBC states that the African Union (AU) is a "pan-African organization whose goal is to propel a united continent towards peace and prosperity." [23] The AU's main goals are political and economic integration, poverty reduction, development, and participation in the global economy.[24] Prior to 2002, the organization was known as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and acted as a speaking forum for influential African leaders in the 1960s during decolonization. [25] Yet, the AU has been experiencing some financial woes just as the AfDB. To keep the AU financially afloat, they accepted an offer by China to invest over \$200m for its new headquarters.[26] This has caused many to speculate about China's desire to buy power and influence over the AU.[27] Additionally, African nations such as Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, and South Africa make up only 40% of the money needed for the AU's yearly operating budget. The rest comes from China, the European Union, and America.[28] However, there are some that applaud the AU's progress in addressing peace and security concerns. An article in the *Economist* entitled "The African Union: Short of Cash and Teeth" suggests that the AU has improved when it comes to exerting political pressure on nations that display "undemocratic behavior." [29] However, the same article states that the AU's rhetoric has become more "pragmatic" by shunning "the lingo of Marxist liberation" in favor of economic integration. One can evaluate this statement as yet another example of an attempt at political unification that fails to abide by Nkrumah's vision for a non-neocolonial Africa. In his book, Nkrumah clearly describes neo-colonialism as Marx's class war on an international scale, with a division between the wealthy West and poor working class of the Global South. Nkrumah goes on to predict that the capitalist structure will be overthrown on a global scale since it is the root of the imperialistic tendencies that lead to neo-colonialism.[30] Nkrumah also stresses the inclusion of African nations with socialist governance for the sake of political and economic unification. Thus, the African Union's shift towards becoming financially dependent on the West while rejecting socialist nations and Marxist ideology demonstrates a dangerous step backwards in the war against neo-colonialism.

After careful examination of the two main large-scale attempts at economic and political unification in 21st century Africa, the African Development Bank and the African Union, one can determine that both initiatives fail to live up to the standards set by Kwame Nkrumah. Both still heavily rely on Western powers for aid and exclude African theories of development and socialist ideologies in their agendas. By perpetuating the ingredients of neo-colonialism, these two institutions are also perpetuating neo-colonialism itself. Both organizations appear to be nothing more but tools used by the West to ideologically infiltrate the minds of African leaders. By utilizing the African Development Bank, the World Bank can advance its neo-liberal notions of privatization and state owned companies that have crippled the economies and industrialization efforts of so many African nations.[31] In the same manner, China and the

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European Union use their financial support of the African Union to influence policies. A return to Kwame Nkrumah's original strategies for combating neo-colonialism must be properly implemented to reverse the vicious cycle of over-reliance on Western powers. More openness should be expressed for continental planning agendas that include nationalization, socialist African political structures, Marxist ideology, and true economic unification. African nations must stop falling prey to the very same divide and conquer techniques used by Western powers to exploit the region during the Age of Imperialism. Only then can the tide of neo-colonialism truly be stopped.

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"The African Union: Short of Cash and Teeth." *The Economist*. January 2011. <http://www.economist.com/node/18014076>

Endnotes

[1] Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas, Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1965), 35-36.

[2]Ibid., xi.

[3]Ibid., 234.

[4]Ibid., xv.

[5] Ibid., xv-xvi.

[6]Ibid., 253.

[7]Ibid., 27.

[8]Ibid., 28-30.

[9]Ibid., x.

[10]Ibid., 25-27.

[11]Ibid., 256.

[12]Ibid., 30.

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[13]Ibid., 227.

[14]Ibid.. 234.

[15] Shannon Lawrence, *Examining The African Development Bank: A Primer For Ngos* (Bank Information Center, 2007), http://www.sarpn.org/documents/d0002529/ADB_NGOs_May2007.pdf, 3.

[16]Ibid., 4.

[17]Ibid., 6

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid., 7.

[20]Ibid., 8.

[21] Franklin Obeng-Odoom, "Africa's Failed Economic Development Trajectory: A Critique ," *African Review of Economics and Finance* 4, no.2 (2013): 167-168. [http://www.african-review.com/Vol.%204%20\(2\)/Africa's%20Failed%20Economic%20Development%20Trajectory.pdf](http://www.african-review.com/Vol.%204%20(2)/Africa's%20Failed%20Economic%20Development%20Trajectory.pdf).

[22]Ibid., 249.

[23] "Profile: African Union," *BBC News*, February 2012, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/3870303.stm.

[24] Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid.

[28] "The African Union: Short of Cash and Teeth," *The Economist*, January 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/18014076>.

[29]Ibid.

[30] Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism*, xvii

[31] Ernest Harsch, "Privatization shifts gears in Africa," *Africa Recovery*, April 2000, <http://www.un.org/en/africarenewal/subjindx/subpdfs/141priv.pdf>.

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