



## KWAME NKRUMAH'S CONSCIENCISM: A PANACEA FOR POLITICAL TURMOIL IN AFRICA

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### Abstract

The issue of politics and governance has been a challenge to humanity, as many efforts have been made towards coordinating human actions and activities. Various political systems and ideologies have been formulated to meet the end target of people-oriented government. However, the present experience has shown massive failure as even the most advanced societies still have problem of governance. Different interests and perhaps ambitions, continue to create rivalries among people, such that intrigues and catastrophe continue to characterize politics and the act of politicking across borders, and Africa as a continent is not spared of this. Hence, the search for a National political ideology to serve as a paradigm upon which political systems can stand a test of time. Many scholars, including African thinkers, resorted into finding a solution to this problem. Nkrumah came up with the theory of Consciencism, as a National Ideological Current to which Africans should resort to in order to end the political quagmire bedeviling the continent. Consciencism as a national political ideology instills national consciousness, where both leaders and the lead are guided by conscience which ensures that national interest takes precedence over that of the individual or partisan interest. In this work, Nkrumah's consciencism is discussed, using critical analyses to arrive at the need for imbibing Consciencism as a national ideological movement capable of bridging the gap created by divergent political idiosyncrasies in a given society. Consciencism if adopted, will go a long way to salvage the political turmoil being witnessed in the continent.

**Keywords** Kwame Nkrumah; Consciencism; National Political Ideology; Nationalist Movement; Socialist Text

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## Introduction

Africa is a continent that has been shaped by various historical and cultural influences, such as colonialism, neocolonialism, Islam, Christianity and traditional African values. These influences have created a diversity of worldviews and ideologies that often clash and conflict with each other, resulting in political turmoil and social instability. How can Africa overcome these challenges and achieve unity, harmony and development? One of the most influential thinkers who attempted to answer this question was Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana and a leader of the Pan-Africanist movement. Nkrumah proposed a philosophy and ideology that he called **Consciencism**, which aimed at decolonizing Africa and restoring its original humanist principles (Kwame Nkrumah, 2009; Kwesi, 2017).

Consciencism was based on the idea that African society has three segments: the traditional, the Islamic and the Christian, which need to be harmonized and integrated under a socialist framework that respects the communal values of African culture (Kwesi, 2017). Consciencism also advocated for a scientific and materialist outlook that rejects superstition and dogma, and embraces dialectical change and categorial conversion as the means of social transformation (Kwesi, 2017).

*Consciencism* as a complex and profound philosophical work displays Nkrumah's erudition, intellectual adroitness and intention to formulate an African text in socio-political philosophy that will ensure the national liberation of the Africans with the notion of ideology as pivotal to decolonization. This research work intends principally to clarify the philosophical character of the text. Such a clarification requires an explication that discloses its essential philosophical telos, and the varied interpretation rendered in view of providing meaning to the text within the spectrum of African philosophical thought and tradition and the search for identity.

## Nkrumah's Early Life and Influences

Kwame Nkrumah was born in the town of Nkroful in the southwestern corner of the British colony of the Gold Coast (now Ghana). Nkrumah was an excellent student in local Catholic missionary schools. While still a teenager, he became an untrained elementary school teacher in the nearby town of Half Assini.

In 1926 Nkrumah entered Achimota College in Accra, the capital of the Gold Coast. After earning a teacher's certificate from there in 1930, Nkrumah taught at several Catholic elementary schools. In 1935 he sailed to the United States to attend Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He graduated from Lincoln University with B.A. degrees in economics and sociology in 1939, earned a theology degree from the Lincoln Theological Seminary in 1942, and received M.A. degrees in education and philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania in 1942 and 1943 (Assensoh, and Kwame, 2007).

Later on, in 1957-1960 he became the first prime minister and in 1960-1966, the president of Ghana and the first black African postcolonial leader. He led his country to independence from Britain in 1957 and was a powerful voice for African nationalism, but was overthrown by a military coup nine years later after his rule grew dictatorial.

His training, research, writings, and experience in teaching philosophy, squarely places him in the nationalistic-ideological camp of Oruka's classification scheme (McClendon, 2003). Categorizing *Consciencism* as nationalistic-ideological captures only one part of its character. While it meets Oruka's adequacy test as a nationalistic-ideological work, the text actually surpasses that particular requirement. For we must not neglect the fact that it is also concurrently the work of an African with training in the professional philosophical tradition under the tutelage of A. J. Ayer (the logical positivist) and enormous influence by Marxian dialectical materialism, Marxism of Lenin, Marcus Garvey, William Edward DuBois, and perhaps more importantly, George Padmore (Makumba, 2007).

### The Systematization of Nkrumah's Work

Scholars like Odera Oruka, Nkombe Oleko and A.J Smet have categorized Nkrumah as belonging to a school of thought that Obi Oguejiofor (2001) described in his work as the *National ideological current or ideological current*. For him, the major aim of this group was not to pass as philosophers, but to seek the economic liberation of the African continent<sup>4</sup> as such they were more of politicians than philosophers. Nkrumah's advocacy of Marxist socialism in African context, which crystallized in his essay on *Consciencism*, is a practical representation of the ideological thrust of the afore mentioned school of thought in African Philosophy. This socialism was such that would pave way for proper synthesizing of the various segments of African experiences (traditional African, Western, and Islamic) so as to bring progress and emancipation from colonialism for the Africans.

### Consciencism at the Substrate of his Corpus

The whole of Nkrumah's contribution revolves around the philosophical corpus he calls *consciencism*. In it, he made effort to appropriate Marxism without compromising his target at reinterpretation of history of philosophy and showing how it served as the instrument of social justice. The theoretical basis of such a service he traced to the *materialistic monism* of the earliest Greek Philosophers, whose theories imposed on them the recognition of the equality of all men (Oguejiofor 2001). Deploying the above philosophical tool in the present state of *neo-Africa* fraught and enlarged by Islamic and Euro-Christian influences, he coined an ideology which for him would ensure progress in African continent. This ideology he calls *Philosophical consciencism* (Wiredu, 2002). Lie went further to define it thus:

Consciencism is therefore that philosophical standpoint which taking its start from the present content of the African conscience indicates the way in which progress is forged out of the conflict in that conscience (Nkrumah, 1970). Following from the above definition, it is clear that the present content of the African's conscience is that fraught with the crisis of synthesizing the traditional African thought with trends of Islamic and Euro-Christian influences. The new ideology is to ensure therefore an order in the whole life of the African people and should be seen in the peoples' class structure, history, literature, arts and religion (Oguejiofor, 2001).

Nkruma found some elements in Marxist philosophy suitable for engendering the required progress for the Africans. For him, traditional African thought include an attitude towards the human person, which can only be described, in its social manifestation as being socialist (Maurice, 2007). It is in this regard that he considers African communalism as the socio-political ancestor of socialism.

In his project of all-African socialist reconstruction, he stated that the goal was not going to be achievable by the disappearance of colonialism or neo-colonialism but by a social revolution. He therefore opined: Social evolution is a dialectical process. Islamic civilization and European colonialism are both historical experiences of the traditional African society, profound experiences that have permanently changed the complexion of the traditional African society (Nkrumah, 1967).

An authentic response to the African situation has to wake up from the suggestion that today's African societies are communalistic in the same that traditional African society were. The contemporary African society is one that has come in contact with other people and has experienced political subjugation, economic exploitation, educational backwardness, industrialization resulting into acculturation. This according to Nkrumah is the kind of society that we should be focusing on. The way forward should be geared towards making the African society reassert itself in the modern context. For this reason, he maintained that the way out is not certainly to regurgitate all Islamic or Fairo-centric influences in futile attempt to recreate a past that cannot be resurrected. The way out is only forward, forward to a higher and reconciled society in a modern context form of society, in which the quintessence of the human purposes of traditional African society reasserts itself in a modern context to socialism, through policies that are scientifically devised and correctly applied.

He concludes by adopting the option of socialism in which the principles of communalism are given expression to in modern circumstances.

### **Major Components of Nkrumah's Consciencism**

Nkrumah's scope is rather extensive, he examines a wide continuum of philosophical sub-fields, which include ontology, ethics, epistemology, history of philosophy, philosophy of law, and social/political philosophy. But it is preeminently a work of socio-political philosophy. To the extent that Nkrumah delves into the history of philosophy or addresses critical questions and issues emanating from ontology, his overriding principle is to draw from such sources what are the needed resources to construct a socio-political philosophy. Some of the major components inherent in his discourse are highlighted and explained below.

#### **Nkrumah's Ontology**

This could be grouped into two parts: Cartesian dualism and materialism.

##### *His Cartesian Dualism:*

Nkrumah's philosophical consciencism is set in the context of Descartes *substance dualism*, which asserts that mind and matter are fundamentally distinct kind of substances. This thought pattern invariably resulted in *psychophysical parallelism*, which is at variance with his philosophy. It must be noted that *psychophysical parallelism* is a doctrine that mental and physical events are of entirely different kinds, so that while mental events can cause other mental events and physical events can cause other physical events, they cannot cause each other but occur in parallel series (Oguejiofor, 2001). For Nkrumah, mental events (conflict in the African conscience) define the course of events in the physical realm. This contradicts the principles of Cartesian dualism which is at the substrate of his philosophy.

##### *His Materialism*

Nkrumah distinguishes between materialism as the theory of sole reality of matter and materialism as the theory of primary reality of matter (Ani, 2016). For him, dialectical materialism is taken in the second sense - as theory of primary reality of matter and consciencism upholds this trend of thought. It argues that qualities are generated for by matter and that the outward qualitative manifestations are engendered by the qualitative in the way that a colour is the visual surrogate of wave motion (Oguejiofor, 2001). It is the materialist base of consciencism that results to *egalitarianism*.

#### **His Socio-Political Philosophy**

This is based on his concept of *egalitarianism* which according to Oguejiofor (2001) gave rise to the ethical principle, which is the same as Kant's categorical imperative. This principle upholds the treatment of each individual not as a means but as an end. It differs from Kant's categorical imperative because the latter is the dictate of the reason while Nkrumah's is the dictate of materialism as the primary reality of matter.

#### **Nkrumah's Ethics**

In his condemnation' of the evils of colonialism and racialism, Nkrumah listed a catalogue of wrongs perpetrated upon African continent in the past by the colonial masters. He declared that the purpose for doing this was to illustrate the different forms which colonialism and imperialism has taken so as to forestall Africa's hard-won independence and national sovereignty (cf. Mutiso *et. al.*, 2007). Following from the above, he called for a united nations of Africa so as to fight against the weapons of mass destruction by the colonialists.

#### **Summary**

All the major components discussed above have their basis in traditional Africa which supports socialism. Such socialism is rooted in communalism, which socialism sought to modernize.

## A Critical Evaluation of Nkrumah's Corpus

Nkrumah's scope is rather extensive, for he examines a wide continuum of philosophical sub-fields, which include ontology, ethics, epistemology, history of philosophy, philosophy of law, and social/political philosophy. But it is pre-eminently a work of socio-political philosophy. To the extent that Nkrumah delves into the history of philosophy or addresses critical questions and issues emanating from ontology, his overriding principle is to draw from such sources what are the needed resources to construct a socio-political philosophy. We now examine critically the wide range of Nkrumah's Consciencism.

### The Philosophical Evaluation

#### The Unsystematized Nature of the Work

For Nkrumah, there is no rigid demarcation that separates the various sub-fields of philosophical inquiry. Socio-political philosophy gains its nutriment from the vast field of philosophical compartments. Nkrumah thinks that philosophical sub-fields ought not to be the narrow domains for restrictive specialization as commonly found with and in the professionalization of philosophy. Hence, he thinks that professional philosophy is often far removed from the social realities that ground philosophy. Categorizing *Consciencism* as nationalistic-ideological captures only one part of its character. It is more than that because it also examines a wide continuum of other philosophical subfields, which Nkrumah did not put in a systematized way in his work.

#### His Connexion of Particularity to Universality

Consciencism is a philosophy of particularity that recognizes the dialectical connection of particularity to universality. Rather than presuppose any mutually exclusive opposition between philosophical trends and schools emerging from Africa and Europe, *Consciencism* seeks to both affirm the particularity of African philosophy and, at the same time, uncover what is objectively binding or universal in philosophy more generally. The objectivity/universality embedded in philosophical thought is unearthed via Nkrumah's social conventional reading. Although African and European philosophies emerge- from different cultural and political milieus, they are not incommensurable on the account provided in *Consciencism*. Nkrumah's method of approaching philosophy from the standpoint of its social contention constitutes his acknowledgement of the objectivity and universality endemic to all philosophical inquiry (McClendon, 2003). This effort must be acknowledged.

#### The Rigors Inherent in the Work

*Consciencism* presupposes that the reader has some background in philosophy. It is not a work that can be digested by the philosophically illiterate. Yet, unlike most professional philosophy texts, one discovers immediate socio-political and intellectual exigencies being addressed in *Consciencism*. The text is not consumed by the academic mandate of pursuing knowledge for the sake of knowledge. It is more than an exemplar of academic philosophy. At base, it is not a work written for purely academic purposes, albeit its language seems to give that impression.

Apart from the above, Nkrumah deployed many arid abstractions in his work. This later brought about the many confusing terminologies used in the work.

#### Consciencism as African Socialist Text: Another Matter of Confusion

The many erroneous and deceitful concepts of socialism currently put out have to be exposed and destroyed. Concepts like African socialism, pragmatic socialism, traditional African socialism Arab socialism, etc., will have to be analyzed and carefully explained so as not to confuse African people as to the real meaning of socialism and the correct way to set about achieving it. Here we have had to wage an unflinching battle for the general acceptance of the principles of scientific socialism. Socialism, in its basic principles, is a science (McClendon, 2003).

Now we have the explicit expression of what was implicit in the text of *Consciencism*. What we see is that Nkrumah was as fierce in the battle then as he had been when he attacked the colonial minded African student, the prodigal student absorbed by the "arid abstractionism" of Western philosophy. Again, in a 1965 interview, he stated clearly that there was "no such thing as African socialism. There is only scientific socialism which is valid the world over, and we are building our society on the basis of scientific socialism (Houtondji, 1983). This statement gives voice to what is implicit in the text of *Consciencism*. Nkrumah has no need for African exclusivism and subjectivism. The validity of scientific socialism cannot rest on metaphysical exclusivism. It must of necessity have a philosophical foundation in dialectical materialism. In *Consciencism*, Nkrumah was satisfied with giving an explication and justification for this foundation.

### **Two Versions of Consciencism: Another Confusion**

In light of what Nkrumah regarded as the new phase in the African revolution, he felt the need to revise the original text of consciencism. According to Houtondji (1983), a comparison of the two editions (1964 and 1970) shows that the author had completely changed his mind about African societies (Houtondji, 1983). In line with this argument, he argues that the first edition of consciencism took it for granted that traditional African society had been free of class struggle being organized on a communal, egalitarian basis which Nkrumah following ethological tradition, called communalism.<sup>19</sup> This view was reversed in *neocolonialism*, when Nkrumah wrote explicitly that class struggle was one of the, fundamental characteristics of contemporary African society. This is a display of confusion emanating from porous ideological platform. African scholars must take cognizance of this so as to have a better hermeneutical approach to Nkrumah's work.

### **The Obscure Coupling of Philosophy and Ideology**

In the third chapter of his work on consciencism entitled "society and ideology", Nkrumah commenting on the text quoted from Mazzini, explicitly embraces an instrumental conception of philosophy. For him, philosophy exists merely to translate spontaneous ideological theses into a more refined language, to elucidate, enunciate and justify, after the event, the decision of the ideological stance (Guyer & Horstmann, 2015). With this, he went further to demonstrate that traditional African society had its ideology but denied plurality of ideologies already credited to Africans in his obdurate attempt to demonstrate that African society had a single ideology.

His inability to make a clear-cut distinction between philosophy and ideology, perforated his discourse on consciencism since the denial of plurality of ideology is a denial of the possibility of philosophizing. The crucial weakness of the project resides in the basic assumption that Africa needs a collective philosophy (Dübgen & Skupien, 2018; Masolo, 1994). This is untenable.

### **Summary**

In as much as there are a lot of limitations, inconsistencies and confusions in Nkrumah's work on consciencism, it must be noted the work has no doubt triggered off a lot of philosophical reflections among scholars which has brought about development in African philosophy. The task of scholars is therefore to reread the work and give a hermeneutical basis to it so that it falls in line with authentic philosophical discourse.

### **Nkrumah's Work and African Search for Identity: A Reflection**

African philosophy is dominated by the search of the continent for a new identity authentic to Africans and distinct from those imposed by outsiders. It was this zeal that motivated scholars like Nkrumah to put up such work like consciencism so as to refute objectification of the Africans as 'the other' by western scholars as described Mudimbe in his book *The Invention of Africa* (1988).

The Kenyan philosopher, Masolo, claims that this search offers a significant contribution to the discussion of reason, or what Hegel called 'the Spirit', part of what is sometimes known as the rationality debate. Masolo traces the foundation of the African contribution to this debate back to a poem by Aime Cesaire translated as *Return to My*

*Native Land* (1939) which introduced the concept of negritude, which captures the "dignity, the personhood or humanity, of black people". Césaire's poem also uses the notion of the return to introduce the element of historicity, to turn negritude into a movement involving consciousness and awareness. Today, Masolo writes, "this 'return' is a deconstructivist term which symbolizes many aspects of the struggle of the peoples of African origin to control their own identity (Masolo, 1994).

This was in response to the overt 'Western white attitude' that aimed to annihilate black culture and black civilization. Kant, for example, had argued that the "original human species was white, appearing as dark brown" only as a result of oppressive climatic conditions, whilst Hegel wrote similarly that "the characteristic feature of the Negroes is that their consciousness has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial objectivity". In Africa, life was not a manifestation of dialectical reason but rather, as Hegel put it, "a succession of contingent happenings and surprises (Masolo, 1994).

Since Hegel's exclusion of Africans from history, anthropologists and others have stressed that because the reasoning capacity of all humans is the same, it is the sociological, rather than the epistemological differences in societies that are important.

But Lucien Levy-Bruhl used his own thirty-nine-year study of African society to postulate a value-laden division between 'primitive' and 'civilised'. His point was that whilst "modern man makes his judgments by means of the principles of identity, the primitive man is dominated by collective representations and realises a mystic participation or relationship with his object (Rohlf, 2010).

The post-war Continental philosophies have continued this process of academic rehabilitation. The strength of post-modernism is that it gives Africans, feminists and others a voice. Its weakness is that it leaves scientism undisturbed, being little more than a temporary fashion or exoticism.

As Masolo puts it, the history of African philosophy is also the history of Africa in a very special way. In any case the concerted efforts made by Africa scholars like Nkrumah was in the bid to establish the fact that Africans are humans like others and that they have and cherish who and what they are. This is the question of identity.

## **Conclusion**

As mentioned earlier that in as much as there are lots of limitations, inconsistencies and confusions inherent in Nkrumah's work on consciencism, it must be noted that the work has no doubt triggered off a lot of philosophical reflections among scholars which has brought about development in African philosophy. The task of scholars is therefore to reread the work and give a hermeneutical basis to it so that it falls in line with authentic philosophical discourse that could be described as African philosophy. A hermeneutical approach to Nkrumah's consciencism has enabled us appraise a lot of notions and issues raised in the work in view of charting a course that will engender the growth of African Philosophy and the development of the African continent.



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