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“Reflections on Late President Kwame Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanism Legacy”

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Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

Please allow me to begin by thanking the Chairperson of the Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa, His Excellency former President of Nigeria, General Olusegun Obasanjo and the management of the Forum for the kind invitation extended to me

to deliver the 2015 edition of the Annual Lecture Series dedicated to the memory of the late Ethiopian Prime Minister, Mr. Meles Zenawi

Your attendance of this event is a strong testimony of your respect and abiding commitment to honouring the work, life and memory of one of Africa's greatest sons, after whom this lecture series is named. And it is my hope that what I am going to say today about yet another extraordinary African, will live up, not only to your expectations, but also it will be a useful addition to the continuous effort of understanding and properly documenting the essence of good leadership in Africa, by learning from the examples, both good and bad, of those who have come and gone before us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I proceed, may I request you to join me in observing a minute of silence for our fellow African brothers and sisters who have been murdered, hacked, raped and burnt alive in South Africa this week.

Let us pray for the safety of the many who are in hiding, being hunted down like animals as I speak. Let's pray for those who are nursing their wounds as they try to recover from the terrible trauma that has been visited upon them by fellow Africans, black Africans I must add.

This week, we have seen the flickering flame of the Pan Africanism dream finally extinguished, at least for me. It will take a great effort to revive this dream, if at all.

Now back to my lecture,

Speaking at this same forum last year during his lecture, Mr. Adebayo Olukoshi quoted Lord Acton in one of his famous letters written in April 1887 and said that " *great men are almost always bad men*". He went on to add his own interpretation of those words, saying that "*great leaders are invariably controversial, forceful personalities, ahead of their time and generation*".

I agree with his observations of human behavior and in particular his characterisation of leaders, cynical as it may seem, because such a definition allows us to have an honest and frank conversation about our leaders and other important personalities whose presence and passing through this world can only be misrepresented at our own peril.

Kwame Nkrumah was a great man of monumental proportions, he was quintessentially inspirational, charismatic with incomparable oratory skills, a political and tactical genius, a brave freedom fighter, a very capable political mobiliser, a brilliant strategist and thinker who more than anyone in history inspired the fight for political independence across the continent.

He was the founding father of the idea of a single, independent and united Africa without colonial borders, an idea whose aspirational and inspirational value has not been diminished by the passage of time and will continue to engage future generations as long as that goal of African unity remains elusive.

In this sense Nkrumah was the foremost and most vocal advocate of Pan Africanism of his time, having famously said on Ghana's day of independence that his country's freedom would remain meaningless as long as other African countries remained under the yoke of imperialism and colonization. It was a very bold, very courageous thing to say, especially on that special

day.

He was in many ways ahead of his time.

He saw the possibility of full independence at a time when the colonial masters were looking forward to holding onto Africa as their property for at least another 100 years. His partners in the struggle for independence thought he was too impatient but he lived to prove them wrong.

I would however consider it a grave injustice and a perversion of history to speak only about Nkrumah's glorious achievements and erase from memory or sweep under the carpet his tragic failings both as a person and as a leader.

This is because Kwame Nkrumah was bad too, famously controversial, impatient, arrogant, suspicious, distrustful of others to the point of being paranoid.

And he was forceful, not always in a good way.

Nkrumah is remembered as a vain, corrupt, dictatorial and ultimately failed African leader.

He therefore fits Mr. Olukoshi's description of a great man. More on this in a few minutes.

Pan Africanism and the Search for Authentic African Heroes

I must confess from the outset that I am not a good student of history, especially of the political category. My formal training as a mechanical engineer did not prepare me well for this kind of assignment. I have therefore spent the past few weeks preparing

and studying the history of Pan Africanism, improving my knowledge of the prominent personalities who have played defining roles in the advancement of this interesting ideology.

I have surprised, disappointed and petrified by what I found.

Surprised because what I found to be the most disturbing revelations about Kwame Nkrumah have actually been part of the public record for many years, laying bare my own ignorance of African history, the kind of dangerous ignorance that I am afraid is shared by many members of my generation of Africans.

Disappointed because in reading about Kwame Nkrumah, I had hoped to find a compelling, inspirational story of authentic African heroism, but ended up with one of a tragic colossal failure of leadership, a cautionary tale of premature celebration of leadership work that is much talked about but was never done. A rush to glorifying outcomes that are more of a creative imagination of the continent's collective hopes and aspirations than accomplished reality.

Petrified because I wasn't sure if this was the right forum or the right time for me to come and speak about my grim discoveries. I even considered pulling out of this role because it is not my intention to offend anyone so publicly, let alone a giant figure of modern African history such as Nkrumah.

I thank the Forum management for assuring me that this is indeed the right place and the right time even for an itinerant ideas man such as me to speak and be heard. I am very grateful for those assurances

Forum Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen

Nkrumah was NOT an African Hero

The focus of my lecture today is to reflect on Kwame Nkrumah's Pan Africanism Legacy. I have gone back in time to look at Ghana's history, in part because I believe that ancient Ghana tells a better and much more powerful story of Panafricanism than contemporary Ghana, at least that is my view.

I have read a number of books written about Nkrumah, including those penned by his admirers and by his critics alike, I read his own speeches, articles and books in which he spoke about his views on African independence, the economy, his dreams and fears. I have read articles and books written by objective, neutral researchers and academics whose intention was merely to document as correctly as possible, what happened during Nkrumah's life on this earth, his accomplishments and also where he fell short.

I must admit that what I found was not pretty.

The opening paragraphs in the Encyclopedia of Geography – Ghana section reads thus about Kwame Nkrumah:

“Though he effected Ghana's independence and for a decade was Africa's foremost spokesman, his vainglory and dictatorial methods brought about his downfall in 1966, with him went a discredited and tragic figure in African nationalism.”

Most writers break down Nkrumah's life into four sections beginning with his early years that continue up to his graduation from University in the US and the beginning of his political awareness when he moved to the United Kingdom.

The second part sees him return home from the UK in 1947 to

become a member of the Gold Coast political movement and this period continues up to 1957 when Ghana became an independent country under his leadership as Prime Minister.

The third period comprises the turbulent years of Nkrumah's rule over Ghana up to his ouster from power in 1966.

Finally, the last final six years of exile, sickness and death.

As I searched for Nkrumah's pan Africanist credentials, I had to focus on the third period of his life, namely the years between 1957 and 1966 when he was the unchallenged leader of Ghana and for all intents and purposes, the undisputed leader of Independent Africa.

Political, social and economic events during this period capture most accurately in my view what Kwame Nkrumah was as a person and as a leader of his people and potentially as the first leader of the global Pan Africanism movement on African soil. In short, this is how the defining events of these years have been captured by historians:

1957

Immediately after independence, Nkrumah embarked on a campaign to give himself maximum political power that would soon see him rule his country unchallenged and unrestrained.

He amended the 1957 constitution by removing the special entrenchment clause giving the legislature that was already dominated by his political party CPP, powers to effect any constitutional changes it deemed necessary and these followed in short order:

- Abolition of regional assemblies
- Dilution of clauses designed to ensure a non-political and competitive civil service
- Appointment of friends, tribesmen and political followers throughout the upper ranks of public employment
- creation of an obedient and dominant party majority in the assembly
- In the same year, parliament passed the Deportation Act and although it was supposed to be applied to non-Ghanaians whose presence in the country was deemed not in the interest of the public good, many who were deported were actually Ghanaian citizens both by birth and by law.

The use of this law in this manner was an early sign that Nkrumah's pan Africanist credentials were suspect at best. Worse still, it set a precedent for the deportations and revenge deportations that Nigerians, Ivorians and numerous other African countries were to engage in many years later, affecting the lives of millions of people and each event dealing a devastating blow to the Panafricanist dream of a united and free Africa.

1958

- Parliament passed the Preventive Detention Act that gave the PM powers to detain people without trial for up to five years. Many of Nkrumah's political opponents were silenced by this law. His erstwhile political partner turned opponent Joseph Danquah was detained under this law and died in

Nkrumah's prison several years .

- Others fled the country including Kofi Busia who returned to lead the country very briefly after Nkrumah's death.

1960

- Ghana became a republic and this was followed by Nkrumah's proclamation as first President of the republic in 1961.
- Nkrumah declared himself President for Life and CPP became the sole political party allowed to operate in Ghana

1961

- An estimated 400-2,000 political opponents of Nkrumah were in detention.
- The judiciary and police were purged of anyone who was suspected of not being totally loyal to Nkrumah and his party

1964

- By way of a referendum, he obtained constitutional power to dismiss any judge
- An act of parliament passed during this same year ensured there would only be one candidate for president in any election and naturally, that one candidate would be none other than Life President Kwame Nkrumah

1965

- This was an election year that went without any fanfare as

Nkrumah's victory was assured by law and absence of any political opposition to his rule.

- It was also the year of the biggest and most important international event to be hosted by Nkrumah and the people of Ghana, namely the 1965 OAU Heads of State Summit. However, beset with boycotts by nearly half of the invited Presidents of free African countries amid concerns that Nkrumah had turned toxic to the very idea of African unity, the summit was sadly a total failure.

1966

- In February 1966, less than six months after his re-election as president, the military overthrew the CPP government while Nkrumah was in Beijing, on his way to Hanoi, North Vietnam, on what he called a peace mission aimed at mediating a peaceful end to the Vietnam war.

The final Days of Kwame Nkrumah

By the time Kwame Nkrumah lay dying in his hospital bed in Romania in 1972, he was a broken and lonely man; long forgotten by most of Africa and the world at large.

His ouster from power by the military six years earlier had attracted only muted protests from a few African capitals, most of them half hearted in their nature and content. So complete was his abandonment by former political partners, erstwhile admirers and even friends that there seems to be no record of a single African head of state who paid him a visit during his long stay in hospital.

When news of his passing finally broke, a collective sigh of relief

swept through African capitals and elsewhere in the world. There was no public mourning for the man who not so long before was celebrated as a towering hero of the fight against colonialism and imperialism and a fierce campaigner for the unification of all independent African states under one government.

By the time of his death, the man once referred to as the Redeemer, the Messiah, the future president of a United Africa; had been reduced to an inconvenient if not irritating presence in the world.

Nobody wanted him anymore, nobody really missed him. Even his final wish for his body to be embalmed and preserved (like that of Lenin) or failing that, to be cremated and his ashes strewn in rivers, streams, deserts and savannas across the African continent, could not be granted. Upon his death, his body was flown back to Ghana where he was quietly buried in his village of birth.

Forum Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am afraid to say, and I say this with utmost respect for Kwame Nkrumah himself, I say this with the most profound empathy for members of his family, for his close relatives and friends, for the people of Ghana and indeed for the people of Africa and the world, I say this with a fair amount of apprehension and sadness, that it is about time we put an end to our obsession with Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah, because he was not the hero, not the state builder, not the Pan Africanist that he has been made out to be by historians over the past half a century.

For when all is taken into consideration, as a political leader, Nkrumah was a colossal failure. As a Pan Africanist, far from

inspiring it, his actions dealt the movement a deadly blow from which it may never be able to recover again.

And Nkrumah was not alone in causing this damage to the cause of Pan Africanism. Many who knew Nkrumah including Tanzania's founding President Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, said that he was very serious about African unity, but other states with their own leaders and heroes had now emerged, and they resented the constant advice from Accra; nor were they likely to surrender their newly won sovereignty to a great union.

Precisely as the new states consolidated their own positions, and as the union became less and less a practicable proposition, Nkrumah's insistence on, and his absorption in, the "Union Government" cause grew.

Mwalimu Nyerere was quoted saying more than a quarter century after Nkrumah's death that he (Nkrumah) sincerely resented Africa's weakness and sought to prevent its "Latin-Americanization," but his methods, his ambition, and the ill-defined nature of his goals doomed the obsession.

"Union Government" became a joke in Africa. With that Ghana's own diplomatic position eroded until when in 1963, it was even denied a position of eminence in the new Organization of African Unity and in 1964, when Julius Nyerere, the prestigious president of Tanzania, publicly denounced him in strident terms, nothing sacred was left either of the cause or of the man [source: encyclopaedia of Geography - Ghana section]

Nkrumah's economic management methods were equally disappointing. Africa's richest colony at the time of independence had less than USD 500 million in its reserves and

was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy by 1965, hardly eight years after it became independent. Corruption in government was rife and some claim it went as high up as the State House. Social discontent was widespread even in Nkrumah's strongest constituencies and when the military putsch came the following year, few were surprised.

Some writers have suggested that the career of Kwame Nkrumah must therefore be seen in the context of the Africa of his time, which sought a dynamic leader but lacked the structures that would make possible the common goal of continental unity.

They go on to say that Ghana's and Africa's very inadequacies initially made them insensitive to Nkrumah's failings, conspicuous among which was the ever-widening gap between his rhetoric, which called for a socialist revolution, and his practice, which accommodated itself to the worst aspects of tribal and capitalist traditions.methods

You must be wondering why I have not mentioned as emphatically, the many good deeds of the Nkrumah rule, such as the visionary infrastructure projects including the Volta Hydroelectric dam, the highways, the industrialisation drive, the massive school enrolments, the vocal and material support for African liberation, etc.

Well, I am mentioning them now albeit as a mere anecdote. They are not acts of heroism but rather what we should expect of an averagely good African leader.

I know and am conscious of the risk I am taking by challenging the record of one of the most admired people in the world.

This is after all the same Nkrumah who was voted Africa's Man of the Millennium by BBC World Service listeners in the year 2000, described no less as a **"Hero of Independence"** and an **"international symbol of freedom as the leader of the first black African country to shake off the chains of colonial rule"**.

All this may be true, but I believe it is high time we raised the bar for measuring heroism in Africa.

It is high time we started taking ourselves more seriously, demanding more of ourselves as a people and even more of our leaders.

It is high time we let our leaders and the world know that for them to qualify as our heroes, their record must stand the test of time, the scrutiny of emotionally disengaged historians and yes, the moral judgement of itinerant ideas men like me who, 50 years from now will be standing before a distinguished audience such as this, ripping apart the legacies of some of our present day leaders.

If there is one enduring lesson we can learn from the Nkrumah years, let it be one of serious reflection on the mark and historical value of African heroism. We must do away with the image of a forever infantile African who gets a standing ovation for a mediocre performance, because this contributes to the erasure of genuine cases of authentic African heroism from our memories and ultimately from history.

After all, Africa has no shortage of real heroes and Ghana has contributed more than its fair share of heroic African leaders, statesmen and Pan Africanists.

Osei Tutu, Opoku Ware, more deserving Pan Africans and Heroes

Historians in the room will agree with me, that Ashanti Emperors Osei Tutu, Opoku Ware and that generation of Ghanaian leaders would have made more successful builders of the modern Ghana state and even more effective drivers of the Pan Africanism agenda that has proved to be such a tough challenge for Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and their successors in African leadership and statecraft.

The leadership lesson I am drawing from the story of Osei Tutu's and his successors' masterful consolidation of a strong confederation comprising numerous culturally diverse minor states that were allowed to exercise internal self rule, living by their own customs under their own local chiefs; the creation of an effective state council to which the confederate states were represented and each chief guarded his prerogative jealously against encroachment by the central authority came about because Osei Tutu and his successors had learned from the mistakes of the empire's earlier conquests of the Akan tribes that sought to forcefully subjugate and assimilate defeated states.

This exemplary magnanimity in the exercise of political, economic and military power by the leaders of Ghana so many centuries ago is what enabled their state to grow easily and remain strong and peaceful for a long time.

This lesson was totally lost on Nkrumah when he quickly rose to become leader of independent Ghana and Provisional President of a United African State as some his Pan Africanist admirers proclaimed. Not surprisingly, it led to disastrous consequences for him personally, for the people of Ghana and it dealt a deadly blow to the flickering flame of the Pan Africanism cause.

Now, the inconvenient truth that we are facing today Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen that, is that Pan Africanism is dead and it died long before the ugly events in South Africa this week.

The blame for the destruction of this noble aspiration lies squarely at the feet of our leaders, Nkrumah being one who played a key role very early on in dismantling that dream.

When Nkrumah made his final speech at the OAU summit in Accra in 1965 calling for all independent African states to unite under one government, the continent had in all 33 member states.

- However, in October this year, we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Accra Summit of the OAU, not with one unified African government but 54 fiercely independent ones, sworn to the policy of non-interference in internal affairs and the respect for the sanctity of borders inherited from former colonial masters.
- We will celebrate this anniversary with an African Union establishment in Addis Ababa that is still struggling with raising money to finance its budgets, including such urgent ones like peacekeeping, accommodating refugees and marshalling responses to emergencies such as Ebola, all this amid stories of impressive growth of African economies and discovery of untold amounts of mineral wealth on the continent.
- We will mark this ominous anniversary with speeches made in the ballrooms and plenaries of a building that was donated to us by our Chinese friends, many years after

Nkrumah imagined a proud, powerful, united and prosperous Africa that would no longer be dependent on handouts from others .

- This anniversary will be marked quietly by more than one billion Africans who continue to face extreme difficulty while crossing the the borders of other African countries, at a time when Africa has responded to the globalisation call by declaring itself open for business, open to all but Africans
- We will mark this historic moment against the backdrop of attacks on black immigrants by black Africans in South Africa that are going on as I speak
- we will still have fresh memories of the mass deportations of Rwandan refugees by the Tanzania government last year
- We will celebrate while being haunted by the images of the planned deportation of Somali refugees by the Kenya government in the next few months. **So much for African compassion and brotherhood. So much for Pan Africanism**
- Finally, we are approaching this anniversary as a continent that is unwilling to expand trade among its members, so much so that the regional trade bodies we have established over the years, SADC, COMESA, EAC, EMOUA, ECOWAS cannot function without support from donors in distant places. We call it "aid for trade" and take it happily from our development partners.

Fifty years after Accra is a long time, and yet we have so little to show for our unification project!

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by saying this. Kwame Nkrumah, with all his imperfections, played his part. His place in history has been secured for better or worse.

But we must also not forget Mwalimu Nyerere's warning in his speech on the event marking 40 years of Ghana's independence in 1997, when he said that "***Africa without unity has no future in this world***".

History has taught us that Nkrumah's one government for all of Africa may not be a realistic goal in today's world order. However, it is our duty to craft a form of a union that works for Africa in the current global setup.

It is not too late and we cannot afford to fail.

And when it comes to picking our heroes, let us be careful to celebrate only those who made an outstandingly and lasting contribution to our lives and to our quest for claiming a dignified place amongst the rest of humanity.

For me, Osei Tutu and Opoku Ware rank amongst the best leaders Africa has produced in the past 2000 years. They were masterful empire builders, wise leaders who cared for their people. The kingdoms they built lasted hundreds of years.

They were Ghanaians, they were Africans.

Today's African leaders can learn a lot from Tutu's and Ware's leadership experience. Current and future generations of Africans can draw inspiration from their accomplishments.

That Ladies and Gentlemen, should be the standard for African

heroism going forward.

And when history is properly written, the record will show that Kwame Nkrumah's legacy of Pan Africanism is a blank page, nothing more, nothing less.

Thank you for listening to me.