

PHILOSOPHY AND IDEOLOGY IN NKURUMAH'S "CONSCIENCISM": A CRITIQUE

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1. Introduction

This paper sets out to achieve the following objectives. First, it seeks to examine the conception of philosophy which informs Nkrumah's attempt to construct a 'Philosophy and ideology for Decolonization' in Africa in his book *Consciencism*.¹ Also, it examines the issue of the extent to which the ideology espoused in this book can be considered as an adequate means of post-colonial reconstruction in African societies. Finally, it shows the connection between the limitations of Nkrumah's conception of philosophy and the inadequacies of the ideological project which he embarks upon in his book. The issues mentioned are discussed in the three parts to which the body of this essay is divided.

2. Nkrumah's Ideological Conception of Philosophy

Nkrumah embraces an 'ideological concept of philosophy'. He rejects any abstract interpretation of the history of philosophy which severs the link between philosophical positions or theories and the socio-political milieu in which they developed. For him, since no philosophy develops in a vacuum, all philosophical positions are products of certain socio-political configurations — every philosophy has a social point. And if this is the case, then philosophy cannot but be ideological.² Thus, in Nkrumah's *Consciencism*, we have a denial of the autonomy of the philosophic enterprise. For in it, Nkrumah does not just observe, as many philosophers have done,³ that there is a dialectical relationship between the social conditions of a society and the content of the philosophical theories put forward by philosophers in that society, he puts forward a stronger thesis, by asserting that a philosophy either supports or opposes a social milieu.⁴ This is the reason why in his reconstruction of the history of western philosophy he unconsciously attempts to draw a one-to-one correspondence between metaphysico-epistemological theories and socio-political positions. Thus he could interpret the philosophies of the ancient (Western?) philosophers — Thales, Anaxagoras, Heraclitus, Plato and so on — in this overtly political manner:

... the earliest philosophies carried implications of a political and social nature, and so were warmly connected with the actualities of life, I am suggesting that the philosophies were reflections of social currents, that they arose from social exigencies. Thus Thales' philosophy needed, if it was to destroy the allegedly heaven — sanctioned aristocratic society, to assert the irrelevance of the pantheon, and this he did in his attempt to bring all explanation of nature within the ambit of nature itself... That, in metaphysics, which implies the rejection of social inequality is precisely that which is common to all monists, those who assert the unity of nature and of the different kinds of things as only different manifestations of the same thing.⁵

Philosophy, thus, becomes, for Nkrumah, not an independent discourse with determinate subject-matters or problems, but an intellectual weapon in the ideological struggle between contending social groups in a society. (Here we should not forget to note the close affinity between Nkrumahism and Marxism).

Now, because of the ideological conception of philosophy which Nkrumah accepts, he could not escape being beguiled by what a notable African philosopher — Paulin Hountondji — ingeniously calls 'the metaphysical illusion', i.e. the belief that 'every political ideal depends on a specific metaphysical system'.⁶ This explains the connection Nkrumah draws, in *Consciencism*, between idealism and capitalism, on the one hand, and on the other hand, between materialism and socialism. For him:

Just as socio-political theories, to the extent that they delay forces for the harnessing and development of nature, fall into two lots, so do philosophies.

Thus, capitalism and socialism represent two political alternatives 'for the harnessing and development of nature,' just as idealism and materialism represent the 'two real philosophical alternatives' for the same purpose. Idealism, because of its reference to spirit, favours 'a class structure of a horizontal sort, in which one class sat upon the neck of another'⁸ and, therefore, provides the metaphysical underpinning for capitalism. Materialism, on the other hand, inspires 'an egalitarian organisation of society',⁹ and therefore serves as the theoretical basis for socialism. This is because it asserts the basic unity of matter. Small wonder, then, that Nkrumah believes not only that the first step in dealing with the problem of

the uneasy co-existence between the three cultural currents in post-colonial Africa — the traditional, the Islamic and the Western — should be to fashion 'a body of connected thought which will determine the nature of our action in unifying the society which we inherited',¹⁰ but also that the metaphysical basis of this cannot be any other than materialism.

Let us, in examining the conception of philosophy of Nkrumah's *Consciencism*, grant him a point. This is that no philosophy exists in a vacuum. Indeed, as Russell puts it, 'philosophers are both effects and causes; effects of the social circumstances and the politics and social institutions of their time: causes... of beliefs which mould the politics and institutions of later ages'.¹¹ We may not for instance, understand the point of Descartes philosophy, if we do not see it within the context of the change in intellectual attitude necessitated that old problems be seen in a new light, i.e. in the light of the general sceptical and fallibilistic attitude engendered by developments in science. In the same vein, we may not appreciate the importance of the debate on African philosophy, if we do not see it in relation to the post colonial search by Africans for self-identification, a search that has been necessitated by the colonial experience. But just as we do not, because of the possibility of tracing the problematics of Cartesian philosophy to developments in the science of his time — 17th century — assimilate philosophical problems to scientific ones, so we cannot, because some philosophical positions, for example Marxism or Plato's theory of the ideal state in *The Republic*, are prompted by considerations of a purely political type or that they have implications for political practice, like the writings of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, J.S. Mill and, of course, Karl Marx do have, reduce philosophy to ideology. The reason why this is so has to do with the nature of philosophical problems themselves.

Philosophical problems, it would appear, arise in different ways some of which have little or no connection with politics. There are, for instance, those problems that arise 'from first order existential situation',¹² those that 'arise primarily out of the kind of conflict and contradictions of the kind of answers propounded as solutions to first-order problem',¹³ (Remember what G.E. Moore said of his interest in philosophy¹⁴) and those that arise 'from developments in other disciplines' — science, history, medicine, and so on. Although these problems, in terms of their origin and the way they are tackled may have their ideological aspects, it would appear that the primary goal of philosophy is understanding (knowledge). Even Marx, an unrepentant partisan in philosophy, would have admitted this. For when he made the famous statement that, 'The philosophers have only interpreted

the world in various ways, the point, however, is to change it', what he meant was that understanding was not sufficient, not that it was not necessary, for socio-political action. But if philosophy, essentially, 'is a cognitive enterprise', an enterprise undertaken on the assumption that it can yield knowledge, then it does not appear that there is any justification for assimilating it to ideology, which, mainly, is geared towards the inspiration and guidance of action.

If the ideological conception of philosophy we find in Nkrumah's *Consciencism* is unsatisfactory, its corollary, i.e. the assumption that 'every political ideal depends on a specific metaphysical system' is no less so. For while it is the case that any metaphysical position a person upholds may influence his/her political or moral disposition, it is not the case that such metaphysical positions must result in determinate political or moral positions. This, I suggest, is the case because the reason a person may want to subscribe to one metaphysical position or the other may not be the same reason he would want to be committed to one socio-political programme or the other. Thus he may be an objective idealist seeing everything as emanations of an eternal spirit, God or whatever because he is dazzled by the complexity and magnificence of the world that he would not want to believe that the world-process is a spontaneous, self-generating and self-perpetuating system, whereas at the level of socio-political practice he may want, because of moral indignation at man's inhumanity to man, support, indeed actively participate, in a socio-political movement that aspires to bring about a just and egalitarian society. On the other hand, he may be a tough-minded materialist seeing everything, including man, as part of nature, which itself does not owe its existence to any other thing, yet favour, at the level of socio-political practice, a tiered society.

But may this not represent an inconsistency on the part of our materialist? In asserting the material unity of everything in the world, is he not thereby asserting a fundamental equality among them? This objection to my position can be decisive only if metaphysical theories are empirical propositions from which definite implications or conclusions can be derived. This, however, is not the case. Metaphysical positions, as theories of reality, are not empirical propositions which can be true or false; they contain a lot of untested, and perhaps, untestable, assumptions which are open to different interpretations. They can, therefore, be deployed to support different socio-political arrangements, ideals or objectives, some of which may not be mutually compatible. But if, as I have been trying to show, the theory of reality to which a person subscribes does not prejudge the political ideology

he embraces, then adherence by a person to idealism or materialism as metaphysical positions (theories of reality) cannot determine whether his political preference would be for capitalism or socialism. Hobbes, for instance, was a tough-minded materialist, yet, in spite of this, indeed because of this, he embraced a concept of freedom — freedom as the mere 'absence of external obstacles' — which issues in inequality, and hence, inequalities, ¹⁵ whereas we have seen egalitarian positions, issue, from some idealist theories, as the phenomenon of christian socialism or even liberation theology clearly shows.

What these examples suggest is that 'a plurality of belief, and theoretical choices does not preclude commitment to the same political ideal' ¹⁶ and that the 'only necessary basis' for political cooperation 'is that common interests are at stake' ¹⁷ not any theoretical or metaphysical unanimity. Had Nkrumah realised this, he would not have had any need to labour 'to reduce the plurality of metaphysical beliefs and choices in African societies' ¹⁸ to an essentially materialist one, thereby, committing the error of selective interpretation. So much for the conception of philosophy in Nkrumah's *Consciencism*, let us now consider the strategy for decolonisation that is enunciated in the book.

3. Consciencism as an Ideology for Post-Colonial Social Reconstruction in Africa

In examining the theoretical blue-print Nkrumah provides for dealing with the socio-cultural imbalances engendered in Africa by the uneasy co-existence of three cultural currents — the traditional, the Islamic and the Western — let us start with a brief, perhaps, too brief, exposition of Nkrumah's characterization of the relationship between society and ideology.

For Nkrumah, 'in every society there is to be found an ideology'. ¹⁹ This ideology, which in most societies is that of the ruling group, serves as a means to two ends: First, as an instrument of cohesion and, second, as the theoretical framework for socio-political action. It is, therefore, both cohesive and constructive in import. ²⁰ For Nkrumah, then, ideology is total in its effect on individuals in society. Like morality, it aims at uniting the action of millions towards specific and definite goals ²¹ by laying down the 'fundamental' principles on the basis of which socio-political actions are appraised and establishing the basis of 'organized obligation' in society. It also 'embraces the whole life of the people', ²² manifesting itself in almost all departments of life in class-structure, history, literature, art and, even, philosophy.

Now, if there is no society without an ideology, and if ideology besides serving as an instrument of social cohesion, also provides for an ideology which will serve as a theoretical framework for socio-political reconstruction in post-colonial African societies can never be exaggerated. Consciencism provides such an ideological/theoretical framework. The need for this kind of ideology for post-independence African societies is underlined by Nkrumah when he writes:

African society has one segment which comprises our traditional way of life; it has a second segment which is filled by the Islamic tradition in Africa, it has a final segment which represents the infiltration of the Christian tradition and culture of Western Europe into Africa, using colonialism and neo-colonialism as its primary vehicles. These different segments are animated by competing ideologies. But since society implies a certain dynamic unity, there needs to emerge an ideology which, genuinely catering for the interests of all, will take the place of the competing ideologies, and so reflect the dynamic unity of society, and be the guide to society's continual progress. ²³

The relevant questions, then are: what is consciencism? and what are its defining elements as an ideology for socio-economic reconstruction in Africa?

Consciencism is a philosophy 'born out of the crisis of African conscience confronted with the three strands of present African society'. ²⁴ It is supposed to provide a synthesis that will ensure the peaceful co-existence 'of traditional Africa, Islamic Africa and Euro-Christian Africa', in accordance with what Nkrumah calls 'the original humanist principles underlying African society'. ²⁵ In short, it is

... the map in intellectual terms of the disposition of forces which will enable Africa to digest the Western and the Islamic and the Euro-Christian elements in Africa and develop them in a way that fits into the African personality. ²⁶

Three stages in the development of the argument for consciencism as an ideology can be discerned. The first step consists of the interpretation of African traditional societies in egalitarian terms. For Nkrumah:

*The traditional face of Africa includes an attitude towards man which can only be described, in its social manifestation, as being socialist. This arises from the fact that man is regarded in Africa as primarily a spiritual being, a being endowed originally with certain inward dignity, integrity and value.*²⁷

This attitude towards man finds expression at the social level in such essentially egalitarian traditional institutions such as the clan. Thus, for Nkrumah, the condition in traditional African societies simply made it impossible for classes of a Marxian kind to evolve. The second step in the construction of this ideology is expressed in the belief by Nkrumah that socialism is not fundamentally different from communalism; except that the two stages in the development of society have been separated in Africa by modern technology and industry. In the words of Nkrumah:

*If one seeks the socio-political ancestor of socialism, one must go to communalism. Socialism has characteristics in common with communalism, just as capitalism is linked with feudalism and slavery. In socialism, the principles underlying communalism are given expression in modern circumstances... socialism, therefore, can be and is the defence of the principles of communalism in a modern setting.*²⁸

From this statement, the third step follows. And this is the contention that the transition to socialism in contemporary African societies cannot be through a revolutionary process. This is the case because, according to Nkrumah,

Revolution... is, thus, an indispensable avenue to socialism, where the antecedent socio-political structure is animated by principles which are a negation of those of socialism, as in a capitalist structure.

*But because the spirit of communalism still exists to some extent in societies with a communalist past, socialism and communism are not in the strict sense of the word "revolutionary" creeds. They may be described as restatements in contemporary idiom of the principles underlying communalism.*²⁹

From these three stages in the construction of consciencism as an ideology, we get a summary of Nkrumah's argument for denying the necessity of class struggle in the attainment of socialism in post-colonial African societies. The argument is that since communalism is the socio-political ancestor of socialism and since the spirit of communalism still exists in contemporary African societies, the transition to socialism in these societies cannot be a revolutionary one. For it is only in those societies 'where the antecedent socio-political structure is animated by principles which are a negation of socialism that the revolutionary path to socialism is unavoidable.

Nkrumah's argument, by attempting to draw a connection between communalism and socialism, raised two questions. It raises, first, the question of whether African traditional societies were, in fact, essentially socialistic and, second, even if they were, whether the changes brought about by colonialism cannot be said to have altered in a very radical manner the character of these societies, thus making the revolutionary path to the attainment of socialism inevitable in Africa. But we do not need to be delayed by a consideration of these issues at this point because, even Nkrumah himself later came to recognise, not only that 'a wide variety of sophisticated political systems were in existence over many centuries before the colonial period began',³⁰ but more importantly that the colonial period ushered in new social structures that led to the development, after independence, of irreconcilable class antagonisms in African societies, particularly between the small, but powerful, class of indigenous oppressors and the oppressed who are in the majority. The existence of these antagonism, according to Nkrumah in *Class Struggle in Africa*, renders 'meaningless and irrelevant',³¹ the notion of African socialism which is given prominence in *Consciencism*.³¹ What I intend to do in the remaining part of this discussion, then, is to tie together the two parts of this contribution by considering certain obvious tensions, in-fact contradictions, in the ideological project that is given expression in *Consciencism*.

Tensions Between Philosophy and Ideology in Nkrumah's Consciencism

It should be clear from the discussions in part three of this work, that consciencism is, in essence, an ideology of compromise. It is a patiently eclectic philosophy which, in an attempt to arrive at a synthesis of 'the best in Islam, Christianity and traditional African humanism',³² brings together 'various tenets of Marxism, Lenninism, petty-bourgeois socialism and

traditional world outlook'.³⁵ It can therefore be said to be in the words of Hountondji, a philosophy in the image of CPP',³⁴ a party which remained throughout the period of Nkrumah's rule a mass party which included 'all members and groups reflecting all tendencies existing in Ghana, including contradictory ones, all expressing, sometimes rather loudly, their views under the umbrella of Nkrumaism...'.³⁵ But just as this policy of equilibrium never failed to generate serious tensions within the CPP as a party and the Ghanaian society as a whole, thereby precipitating the downfall of Nkrumah and his rule, so does the ideology (or is it philosophy), of Consciencism display glaring contradictions that call to question its adequacy as a framework for de-colonisation in Africa. I illustrate these contradictions in Nkrumah's ideology in terms of two fundamental tensions that are clearly noticeable in his book: *Consciencism*.

The first tension is that between Nkrumah's ontology which is materialist and his strategy for action which is idealist. If, as Nkrumah says, matter is the primary stuff from which other elements of the universe are derivable through what he calls the process of 'categorical conversion', then one would have thought that, in his interpretation of colonialism and, consequently, in mapping out a strategy for decolonisation, he would give prominence to the material (that is, socio-economic conditions) that determined the nature of the colonial enterprise. What we find in Nkrumah, on the contrary, is what may be called a superstructural interpretation of this enterprise, a kind of interpretation which sees colonialism in terms of a clash between different cultural currents and, therefore, 'sees ideas as the primary vehicle of change'. This kind of interpretation, to say the least, does not allow for a thorough-going analysis 'of the internal composition of colonial and post-colonial African societies'.³⁶ Yet, this is what is urgently needed for any realistic programme for the socio-economic reconstruction of African societies.

The second tension we note in *Consciencism* is a specific case of the general tension in his theory I have just highlighted. This is the tension between the humanist philosophy which, according to Nkrumah, informed socio-political practice in traditional African societies and the materialist ontology which he says underpins this philosophy. Nkrumah, in one breath asserts that 'man is regarded in Africa as primarily a spiritual being, a being originally endowed with certain inward dignity, integrity and value',³⁷ and yet, in another, says that consciencism agrees with the traditional African idea of the absolute and independent existence of matter, the idea of its power of self-motion'.³⁸ A glaring contradiction.

But what, we may ask, is the source of these contradictions that can easily be noticed in Nkrumah's *Consciencism*? Here, I suggest that these errors should be traced to the limitations of Nkrumah's conception of philosophy. Because Nkrumah embraces an ideological conception of philosophy, he is more concerned with the goal to be attained at the expense of the means of attaining this goal, a kind of theoretical machiavellianism, so to say. What seems to be of cardinal importance to him in *Consciencism*, therefore, is not so much the internal consistency of his theoretical formulations but his ability to arrive at the object of his theoretical formulations, his ability to arrive at the object of his book, i.e., 'to link socialism with the purest African tradition by showing that socialism, far from being a betrayal of this tradition would actually be its best possible translation into modern idiom'.³⁹ Small wonder then that he could give a rather arbitrary interpretation of the history of Western philosophy in overtly political terms and also succumb to the illusion that traditional African societies apart from being culturally homogeneous, were also without class differentiations.

Thus, in Nkrumah's *Consciencism* we see a clear demonstration of the limitations of any attempt to regard politics 'as the key determinant of philosophical discourse' and, therefore, the futility of reducing philosophy to 'ideology'.

Notes and References

1. Published in London by Panaf Books Ltd., 1970. The phrase quoted above is the sub-title of this book.
2. See *Consciencism* chapter entitled 'Philosophy and Society'.
3. See, for instance, Bertrand Russell's book, *A History of Western Philosophy*, London: George Allen and Unwin (Publishers) Ltd., First published in 1946.
4. See *Consciencism*, p. 56.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 34—35.
6. Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, translated by Henri Evans with the collaboration of Jonathan Ree. London: Hutchinson University Library for Africa, 1983, p. 154.
7. *Consciencism*, p. 74.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
11. Bertrand Russell, *Op. cit.*, p. 7.

12. P.O. Bodunrin, 'Philosophy: Meaning and Method', *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*, No. 1, April 1981, p. 14.
13. Ibid.
14. Moore is reported to have written of his interest in philosophy in his Autobiography thus:
I do not think that the world or the sciences would ever have suggested to me any philosophical problems, what had suggested problems to me is the things which other philosophers have said about the world or natural science..
 This is quoted in John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968. p. 201.
15. Cf. Charles Taylor, 'What is Wrong with Negative Liberty?' in Alan Ryan (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom* Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 179.
16. Paulin Hountondji, *Op. cit.*, p. 154.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. *Consciencism*, p.57.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid, p. 58.
22. Ibid, p. 59.
23. Ibid., p. 68.
24. Ibid, p. 70
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., p. 79.
27. Ibid., p. 68.
28. Ibid., p. 73.
29. Ibid., p. 74.
30. K. Nkrumah, *Class Struggle in Africa.*, London Panaf Books. 1970, p.3
31. For an interesting analysis of this transition from 'African Socialism' to 'Scientific Socialism' see Omafume F. Onoge, 'Kwame Nkrumah and the class question in the African liberation struggle', in Onigu Otite (ed.) *Themes in African Social and Political Thought*, Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co., Ltd., 1978, pp. 217—231.
32. Geoffrey Hunt, 'Nkrumah's Consciencism: Materialist Theory and idealist Practice', *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, Ile-Ife, Nigeria: University of Ife press, Vol. IX, Numbers 1 & 2, January/July 1980, p. 15.

33. Yuri Smartin Kwame Nkrumah, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987, p 195.
34. Paulin Hountondji, *Op. cit.*, p. 150.
35. Charles Martin, 'Nkrumah's Strategy of De-colonization: originality and Classicism' *Presence Africaine*, NO. 85, (1973), p. 92
36. Paulin Hountondji, *Op. cit.*, p. 150.
37. *Consciencism*, p. 68.
38. Ibid., p. 97.
39. Paulin Hountondji, *Op. cit.*, p. 146.

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