

Ghanaian independence after oil

By [Sarah Azaransky](#)

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Last week, Ghana's parliament approved a Ghanaian company to explore oil fields off its coast. This is noteworthy because [most companies working to extract Ghana's oil](#) are American or European. In fact, in 2007 it was a [U.S.-based company that discovered the vast oil reserve](#). To transnational piracy and the [increased U.S. military presence](#) that have accompanied oil, Ghana has responded with lively, public debate about neocolonialism—a term coined by Ghana's founding father Kwame Nkrumah.

When the Gold Coast became Ghana in 1957, Nkrumah foresaw that independence would be meaningless unless the country maintained political and economic freedom. Freedom did not mean isolation, however. Nkrumah's anticolonial vision was also insistently internationalist—a position he came by honestly.

In the late 1930s, Nkrumah earned degrees—including a masters in sacred literature—from HBCU Lincoln University and from Penn. By 1945, he was in Manchester to organize the momentous fifth Pan-African Congress, which called for the decolonization of Africa. After returning to the Gold Coast, Nkrumah drew from Gandhi's methods to develop Positive Action, a "practical revolutionary politics" that upheld the "moral correctness of nonviolence."

As leader of the first African nation to become independent of European colonial control, Nkrumah was an inspiration to democratic movements around the world even as he became an "astute, demagogue-dictator," as *Century* contributing editor Cecil Northcott put it at the time. During the period when Nkrumah jailed 400 of his political opponents under the Preventative Detention Act, he also managed to be prophetic about neocolonialism—what he identified as a new kind of Western economic, military and cultural control without territorial occupation.

In response to France's plan for nuclear tests in the Algerian desert, Nkrumah welcomed an international coalition that became known as the Sahara Project. Spearheaded by Bayard Rustin—the black American Quaker pacifist and advisor to

Martin Luther King—a protest team departed from Accra in December 1959, with the goal of traveling 2,000 miles overland to nonviolently halt nuclear tests scheduled for February 1960.

By most measures, the project failed. The protest team was stopped just 30 miles across Ghana's northern border, in French-controlled Upper Volta. It received little press attention in France, Britain or the U.S.

But it exceeded expectations in rallying African nonviolent opposition to nuclear testing. Throughout West Africa there were fasts, picketing, and leafleting, and there were mass demonstrations in Tunis and Tripoli. Perhaps most significantly, the project developed new kinds of strategic and moral alliances: European anti-nuclear groups, African liberation forces, American civil rights activists, and the Ghanaian government cooperated to push back against neocolonialism.

Nkrumah was deposed by a military coup in 1966, and only in the last decade has Ghana enjoyed free and fair elections. Meanwhile, as churches have replaced politicians in claiming the mantle of moral leadership, Ghana has become a focal point of another kind of transnational and independence movement: that of African Initiated Churches. AICs distinguish themselves from churches with missionary ties in a number of ways, notably by embracing African Traditional Religion.

While it is a truism to point to the shift of Christianity to the global South, many of us in the North are less aware of Africans' constructive theological engagements with pressing political and social concerns. For instance, two scholars at the University of Ghana focus on the role of religion in Ghana's environmental wellbeing. Historian of religions [Rose Mary Amenga-Etego](#), a leader in the Circle of African Women Theologians, emphasizes how Ghanaian Christianity is intertwined with indigenous religio-cultural systems. Despite a dominant narrative that indigenous worldviews gainsay economic growth, Amenga-Etego has shown how indigenous religion is a resource for sustainable development projects.

Christian ethicist [Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo](#) analyzes AIC preaching that connects faith to wealth. Ghanaian AICs have not merely imported an American prosperity gospel. Instead, Golo has found that AICs employ a kind of neo-liberationist theology when they analyze the social situation, undertake a contextual reading of the Bible, and suggest alternatives to transform suffering. In the face of preaching that often promotes a Western standard of living as a divine mandate, Golo challenges AICs to

take the African context seriously by developing a soteriology that includes creation.

Retrieving an aspect of Nkrumah's legacy and cutting-edged scholarship like Amenga-Etego's and Golo's may indeed help Ghanaians in their ongoing efforts to maintain independence and freedom in the wake of becoming an oil producer. They can also be useful reminders for American Christians about our own contexts and histories. We are reminded that our theological reflections are always already local, enlivened and limited by our particular cultural contexts.

At the same time, by revisiting the civil rights movement from an internationalist perspective, we may discover models of transnational resistance to ongoing Western economic and military engagements in West Africa.

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