

CHAIRMAN'S OPENING REMARKS

15th Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Lectures · Lecture 1
University of Cape Coast · Thursday, 17 September 2026 · 2:00 p.m.

Theme: Kwame Nkrumah, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow — Perspectives on Constitutionalism, Development and Pan-Africanism

Sir Samuel Esson Jonah, KBE · Chancellor

Good afternoon.

It is an immense honour and privilege to welcome you all to the University of Cape Coast for the opening lecture of the 15th Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Lectures.

A CONFESSION

Let me begin with a confession, because it is better that you hear it from me than read it later in *The Insight*.

I am, and have been for as long as I can remember, an unapologetic, die-hard Nkrumahist. I am aware that a Chancellor is expected to preside over a lecture series with an air of scholarly detachment. I shall do my best. But I would rather you knew at the outset that the man in the chair is not a neutral — and that when our lecturer rises over the next two days, he will find in me not a sceptic to be converted but a convert to be kept awake.

THIS LECTURE SERIES

This lecture series is one of the oldest institutions this University possesses. It was instituted in 1974, in the shadow of Nkrumah's death, and inaugurated in November 1976 by Dr Archie Casely-Hayford. Over half a century it has brought to this campus some of the most serious minds of the African world — Sir Shridath Ramphal, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, Professor Emmanuel Akyeampong, Ambassador Arikana Chihombori-Quao, Prof Akilagpa Sawyerr, the late Dr. Kwesi Botchway, K.B Asante and many others. Its mandate has never changed: to take the questions Kwame Nkrumah asked,

and to ask them again, out loud, in the light of our own times. The passage of time has neither diminished his stature nor eroded the relevance of his thought. He was not merely a political leader; he was a profound thinker, a committed Pan-Africanist, and an unwavering champion of African dignity and self-determination.

It is most fitting that it is UCC which has instituted these lectures. Before he was Osagyefo, before Lincoln and London, Kwame Nkrumah was a young teacher at a Catholic school in Elmina, a few miles down the road from where we sit. And this University is itself one of his ideas made concrete — founded in 1962 to train the teachers a new nation would need. We are not merely his memorialists. We are, in a real sense, his handiwork.

TEACHING OUR HEROES

Let me add something that I am told is true, and that I fear is true. The ideas Nkrumah stood for are hardly taught in Ghanaian schools. A young person can pass through our entire system — from primary school to a degree — and emerge knowing the date of the coup, the names of the roads and the face on the banknote, and almost nothing of *Consciencism*, of *Africa Must Unite*, of *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, in the departments of African American Studies at American universities, Nkrumah is on the syllabus. He is read, assigned, examined and argued over. There is an irony in that. He was educated at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and it is in Pennsylvania, rather than in Cape Coast, that his books are most reliably read. The American student meets Nkrumah as a thinker. Too many Ghanaian students meet him only as a statue.

That is the first reason lectures like these matter. They are a standing reminder that a nation which does not teach its heroes will, in time, cease to recognise them. And I would gently commend a thought to the Vice-Chancellor and to Convocation: that a university which carries Nkrumah's

name on its lecture series might also carry his ideas in its curriculum. I do not presume to write the syllabus. I merely observe that we already have the books.

WHY THIS YEAR

And I cannot think of a year in which Nkrumah's questions have been more alive.

Four days from now, on the 21st of September, the nation will mark Founder's Day — the 117th anniversary of his birth. Seven months ago, on the 24th of February, we passed a quieter and more uncomfortable anniversary: sixty years since the morning the soldiers came, and the First Republic ended.

I was sixteen years old that morning, a schoolboy up the hill at Adisadel. I remember the confusion more than the politics. I remember that grown men in Cape Coast could not agree whether to weep or to cheer, and that some of them managed both within the same week. Sixty years on, as a nation, we have still not entirely decided. That is not a criticism. It is the reason a university holds lectures.

This is also a year in which the two great preoccupations of Nkrumah's life have marched back onto the front page.

On constitutionalism: the country is, as we speak, in the middle of the most serious conversation about our 1992 Constitution since the document was written. A review committee has reported; the Government has stated its position; and the arguments are now the property of every citizen, as they should be.

On Pan-Africanism: on the 25th of March this year, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution, tabled by Ghana on behalf of the African Union, recognising the transatlantic trafficking and enslavement of Africans as a grave crime against humanity. One hundred and twenty-three nations voted for it. That resolution was the culmination of a campaign

championed by President Mahama at the United Nations last September — and its intellectual scaffolding owes a very great deal to a book written by the man who will shortly address you.

So the theme Mr Pratt has chosen — and it is his choice, not ours — *Kwame Nkrumah, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* — is not an academic convenience. It is a description of where we are standing.

The three pillars of that theme carry a real urgency for this continent, and I will state them plainly. Constitutionalism demands more than ink on paper: it demands the rule of law, institutional integrity, accountable governance and the protection of human dignity. Development must mean more than the metrics: it must measurably improve the quality of people's lives, empower communities, and harness our resources for the common good. And Pan-Africanism asks us to look beyond borders that were drawn for us, to embrace a shared destiny, and to build the regional frameworks that make that destiny more than a slogan.

THREE THINGS ABOUT HOW WE LISTEN

I will not deliver the lecture. That would be discourteous to our guest and, frankly, above my pay grade. But permit me, as Chancellor, to say three things about how I hope we will listen over these two days.

First, on constitutionalism. I am aware that this is the part of Nkrumah's record on which his critics have dined for sixty years, and that the Preventive Detention Act is their main course. Let me say a word about it — not as an apologist, but as someone who prefers his history served with the context left in.

The Act was passed in 1958 by a state barely a year old, which had already lived through political bombings and a violent secessionist agitation in Ashanti, and which within months would uncover a plot against the government inside its own army. It was hardened — and its opponents will say abused — each time someone tried to kill the head of state: at Kulungugu in

1962, where a grenade meant for Nkrumah killed a schoolgirl standing beside him; and at Flagstaff House in January 1964, where a constable of his own guard fired on him at close range. The referendum that made Ghana a one-party state followed that second attempt by a matter of weeks.

Every state that has believed itself in mortal danger has reached for such instruments. Britain interned its own citizens without trial under Regulation 18B in the Second World War, and again in Northern Ireland in the 1970s. The United States suspended habeas corpus under Lincoln, interned more than a hundred thousand of its own people of Japanese descent in the 1940s, and wrote the Patriot Act after 2001. None of this makes preventive detention a good thing. It makes it a human thing — a thing to be weighed in context, not condemned in caricature.

So I ask only this: that over these two days we judge Nkrumah's constitutionalism by the standard we apply to everyone else's — by what he faced, by what he built, and by what he left. He faced men who wished him dead. He built, in 1960, the first republican constitution in the history of this land, and put it to the people in a plebiscite. And he left a nation that has now lived under a written constitution of its own for thirty-four years and is settled enough to argue, calmly, about amending it. That, too, is part of the inheritance.

Second, on development. Here I speak with some feeling, because I have spent my life watching what happens to a country's resources when the wrong people are in charge of them — and, now and again, when the right people are. Nkrumah built. Akosombo. Tema. The motorway. The Ghana Education Trust schools. The universities, including this one. Whatever else is said of him, he understood that independence without industry is a flag without a factory.

And we, his heirs, have too often been content with the flag. We have spent sixty years arguing about Nkrumah and rather less time doing what he actually did, which was to build things. Some of you will recall that I once made myself briefly unpopular by suggesting that a culture of silence was creeping back into

our national life. I mention it only to say that a university is the one place in any country where silence is not an option — where knowing is supposed to become saying, and saying is supposed to become doing.

Third, on Pan-Africanism. On the night of independence Nkrumah told us that Ghana's freedom was meaningless unless it was linked to the total liberation of the continent. For a long time that sentence was treated as beautiful rhetoric — the sort of thing we quote and do not mean. It is beginning to mean something again. The African Continental Free Trade Area has its secretariat in Accra. The campaign for reparations, which is at bottom a campaign about the terms on which Africa meets the rest of the world, has moved from the margins of activism to the floor of the General Assembly. I am myself involved in an initiative with the immodest name of *Make Africa Borderless Now*, so you may guess which side of that argument I am on.

But I would ask our students especially to listen this week for the hard questions, not only the applause lines. Reparations for what, from whom, in what form — and, this is the businessman in me asking, what will we do with them that we have not done with what we already had? Those are not hostile questions. They are the questions Nkrumah himself would have asked first.

OUR LECTURER

Which brings me to the man the University Council has invited to answer them — Kwesi Pratt Jnr is not merely an advocate; he is a recognised authority on Nkrumahism — and after decades as a journalist, publisher and public intellectual, there is no one better suited to deliver this fifteenth edition.

Kwesi Pratt Jnr was born on the 7th of September 1953, which means he celebrated his seventy-third birthday ten days ago — and I am reliably informed that he did so in the manner of all serious revolutionaries, by working.

He is the Managing Editor of *The Insight*, a newspaper he founded in the early years of this Fourth Republic and which has been telling successive

governments things they did not wish to hear ever since. He is the founder of Pan African Television. He was a member of the Alliance for Change that organised Kume Preko in 1995 — a demonstration which some of us in business watched with alarm and, in private, a certain admiration. In the years of military rule he was detained, by one reliable count, fourteen times, and emerged from each detention noticeably louder than he went in. It earned him, among his admirers, the title of ‘agitator-general’. It has stuck.

I like to share an observation with you. In fifty years of public life — his and mine — I have never known Kwesi Pratt to say a thing he did not believe, to run from a fight he thought was right, or to profit from a cause he championed. In a country where the culture of silence has a way of creeping back, that record is worth more than any degree we can confer on him — though we intend to confer one anyway.

Last year he published *Reparations: History, Struggle, Politics and Law*. The President of the Republic wrote the foreword. The book was placed in the hands of African Heads of State in Malabo before it went on sale in Accra. And its central argument — that reparations are not charity but justice, and are not only about money but about dignity, memory and sovereignty — can be traced almost line by line into the campaign that produced the United Nations resolution of March this year. It is not often that a journalist in Ghana writes a book and the General Assembly of the United Nations changes its mind. It happened. He did it.

On Friday, at the close of these lectures, this University will confer on him the degree of [Doctor of Letters, honoris causa], and I shall have the privilege of robing him. I have been warned that persuading Kwesi Pratt into an academic gown may be the hardest negotiation of my career. I fancy my chances.

TOMORROW

Let me close where the theme closes: with tomorrow.

Nkrumah was forty-one when he walked out of James Fort Prison to form a government, and forty-seven when he lowered the Union Jack. Most of the men and women who built this country's First Republic were younger than the average board of directors I have sat on.

Yesterday belongs to the historians. Today belongs, for our sins, to people like me. Tomorrow belongs to the students in this hall — and I say to you: do not come to these two days looking for a hero to worship or a villain to blame. I say this as a man who has already confessed to the first offence, so do as I say and not as I do. Come looking for an argument worth having. That is what Nkrumah left us. That is what Kwesi Pratt has spent his life having. And that is what this University exists for.

I wish us all a stimulating and thought-provoking first lecture.

It is my honour and privilege to declare the 15th Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Lectures duly opened.

Mr Pratt — the floor, and the University, are yours.

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