

From Saint to Devil: The Visual Transformations of Kwame Nkrumah in *Accra Evening News* Cartoons, 1961 - 1966

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Abstract

Regular cartoons reflect a degree of public anger or a spirit of activism against any number of perceived social ills. They are a form of angry laughter indulged at the expense of the perceived perpetrators of these “social ills.” They are often on the side of the underdog and could be potentially subversive of authority, secular, religious or otherwise. They feed on the art of gross exaggeration and deliver their punches by a gross magnification of the realities they comment upon. Often, taken together over a period of time, cartoons evolve into sophisticated narratives on historical events and representations of historical personalities. Ghana’s first prime minister and president Kwame Nkrumah was a constant presence on the editorial cartoon pages of the *Accra Evening News*. However, the Nkrumah cartoons undergo a narrative transformation from highly hagiographic depictions of the Ghanaian leader before the coup to highly critical lampoons after the coup. This paper examines this visual transformation of the Ghanaian leader from saint to devil and its implications for understanding the historical Nkrumah.

Regular cartoons often reflect dissenting opinion, a degree of public anger or a spirit of activism against any number of perceived social ills. They are a form of “angry laughter” indulged at the expense of the perceived perpetrators of “social ills”. They are often on the side of the underdog and potentially subversive of authority, secular, religious or otherwise. They feed on the art of gross exaggeration and deliver their punches by gross magnification or diminution of their subject. Often, over a period of time, cartoons evolve into sophisticated narratives on historical events and representations of historical realities (Westin 1979). French psychoanalyst

Jacques Lacan complicates the idea of images representing realities when he suggests that “in its relation to desire, reality appears only as marginal” (Lacan 1998: 108). In this article, I demonstrate that cartoon representations of Ghana’s first president Kwame Nkrumah underwent a dramatic transformation following his removal from power in a military-police coup on February 24, 1966. I argue that if we accept Lacan’s theory of the centrality of desire as motivation for artistic representations, it will be near impossible to see the “real” Nkrumah from cartoon representations of the Ghanaian leader both before and after his removal from power. Rather, the cartoons portray the hopes and desires of the various cartoonists and editors for acceptance by and security from the Nkrumah state.

By 1961 when our cartoon narrative begins, freedom of expression was a thing of the past in Ghana. The passage of the Preventive Detention Act in 1958 gave Nkrumah and his government officials the power to have anyone arrested and detained for a period of up to five years without charges, without trial, and without the benefit of habeas corpus or intervention by the regular courts should in their estimation the person pose a threat to the security of the state or Ghana’s relations with other nations. The Book and Newspapers Registration Acts of 1961 and 1963 effectively neutralized what remained of Ghana’s private media and placed all newspapers firmly in the service of the CPP government (Kesse-Adu 1971; Omari 2000; Nugent 2009: 10). State control of the media meant that only journalists supportive of Nkrumah’s party could voice their opinions in newspapers, and those opinions were expected to be in support of the government’s agenda. As this article demonstrates however, some journalists, especially the cartoonists Ghanatta, Sam, and Thiks became adept at hagiographic representations of Kwame Nkrumah that went beyond support for him or his policies.¹

Nkrumah was a constant presence on the editorial cartoon pages of the *Accra Evening News*. The first of Nkrumah’s newspapers, the *Accra Evening News* was the official mouthpiece of his Convention People’s Party (CPP).

¹ It has not been so far possible to discover the real identities of these cartoonists.

However, while Nkrumah was depicted as a saint in the pre-coup cartoons, he was depicted as a devil in the post-coup cartoons. While he was in power, journalists at the *Accra Evening News* loudly sang his praises, comparing him to Christ, Muhammad and the Buddha. When he fell from power, these same journalists drew highly uncomplimentary, even insulting images of Nkrumah. This representational transformation from highly hagiographic depictions of the Ghanaian leader before the coup to highly critical lampoons after the coup complicates our understanding of the historical Nkrumah and the nature of historical knowledge and evidence. Cartoon depictions of Nkrumah as a savior and a saint literally died with his regime. Overnight, he became a devil who, it was suggested by the cartoonists, had all his years in power thrived on the blood and sweat of Ghanaians.

The Nkrumah cartoons considered for this study might loosely be divided into several interconnected categories. The first three of these are found in pre-coup editions of the *Accra Evening News*, covering the period 1961 to February 1966.² Predominant topics were, in the first category, internationalism, decolonization and neo-colonialism, in the second, Nkrumah's political opponents, and in the third, Nkrumah's saintlike personage. The fourth and fifth categories cover the post-February 24, 1966 coup. Both are highly critical of, and even insulting to, Nkrumah and his associates. Several cartoons depicting Ghana itself and Nkrumah's party, the CPP, are found in both the pre-coup and post-coup cartoons. All cartoons undergo a pictorial and representational transformation as the narrative moves past February 24, 1966, the day of the coup d'état.

² For the past three years, an increasing number of Ghanaian newspapers at the Public Records and Archives Division in Accra have become inaccessible to researchers. They are all said to be taken out of circulation for a repair process that does not seem to be taking off, year in, year out.



Figure 1



Figure 2

International Issues

The first category of pre-coup cartoons comment on major international issues of Nkrumah's day: A 1961 cartoon depicts Britain as a fat, old, balding man on his knees beside a bed and before an image of the devil on the opposite wall praying "...And please God don't let the UN Committee go into South West Africa ..." (*Accra Evening News*, July 18, 1961. See Figure 1); another cartoon parodies Britain's dilemma whether to join the European Common Market or stay with the Commonwealth. The cartoon shows a horned and worried Prime Minister Harold Macmillan grabbing Lady Commonwealth in one hand and embracing Lady Common Market in the other and saying "I love that Dame ... But I can't afford to be a polygamist too! Hmm!!!" (*Accra Evening News*, July 25, 1961. See Figure 2).

Other international issues reflected in this category include NATO, the United States, Ghana-Togo relations, Apartheid South Africa, and the crisis in Southern Rhodesia over Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence. In a December 1965 cartoon, South African prime minister Henrik Verwoerd is depicted as a giant ogre trampling upon a pile of



Figure 3

human skulls and displaying a parchment that says "South Africa is Republic for Whites Only" (*Accra Evening News*, December 20, 1965: 3. See Figure 3)

Done by the cartoonists Thiks, Ghanatta, Kweku and Samco, all these international cartoons spoke the language of Nkrumahism: They were all condemnations of imperialism, neo-colonialism, and their perceived instruments and stooges in Africa and abroad as articulated by Nkrumah. They were all appendices to the official narrative of the Nkrumah government on international issues as articulated by Nkrumah himself (see Nkrumah 1957; Nkrumah 1961; Nkrumah 1963).

According to Nkrumah, political independence represented only a first victory over the forces of imperialism, a first stage in the struggle for total liberation from the forces of imperialism and neocolonialism. Nkrumah argued that having formally conceded defeat, colonial powers always tried to maintain their grip on decolonized peoples by building in "schisms" into the independence constitution which they would then later exploit through a regime of neocolonialism, a "strategy of divide and rule from afar" perpetuated through the use of local imperialist stooges (Nkrumah 1963: 57). In order to preserve imperial interests in the former colony, the departing colonialists institutionalized a culture of "constitutional rigidity [...] political separatism [...] and a civil service apparatus insulated from the new political power in the young state and holding it ransom at will" (The Spark 2002: 38f).

This constitutional rigidity made it hard to amend the constitution to meet the needs of the new nation; political separatism was perpetuated through a system of multi-party politics that hampered the nation's progress; and a civil service apparatus insulated from direct state control limited the state's effectiveness in administering the affairs of the nation the way it liked. All of these aspects of the neocolonial constitution needed to be amended and brought in line with the aspirations of the new nation as Nkrumah and the CPP articulated them. It was the strategy through which Ghana would be transformed into a socialist nation and a union of West African and later, African socialist states on the continent created. The *Accra Evening News* of

Nkrumah's day was an arena for Nkrumahist propaganda that, to paraphrase Daniel Boorstin (1961), oversimplified historical experience. Whatever was declared bad by Nkrumah was declared bad by the *Accra Evening News*; whatever was declared good by Nkrumah was declared good by the *Accra Evening News*. Nkrumah himself was portrayed as a perfect, infallible superman.

Nkrumah and his political opponents

This cartoon narrative of Nkrumah as infallible superman also served as a counter narrative against those who disagreed with Nkrumah. These political opponents of the leader were the subject of a second category of pre-coup cartoons. Lampoons of Nkrumah opponents were especially prominent in the wake of a series of bomb explosions at Kulugungu and Accra in the early 1960s, allegedly carried out by opposition elements of the United Party/National Liberation Movement, most of whom were former colleagues of Nkrumah in the CPP and the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC). Following the promulgation of the Preventive Detention Act in 1958, many opposition leaders were detained, some fled into exile and some, like J. B. Danquah, Obetsebi Lamptey, Kofi Busia, Tawio Adamafio and Komla Gbedemah were implicated in alleged conspiracies against Nkrumah's life.

These "enemies of progress" are depicted in this category of cartoons as horned devils and rats, shady characters, enemies of Ghana working with external imperialists and neocolonialists to disrupt Nkrumah's "great program on Work and Happiness. Some cartoons depicted sacked Chief Justice Sir Arku Korsah being assailed by the angry ghosts of innocent bomb blast victims (*Accra Evening News*, October 6, 1963; December 11, 1963: 1; December 12, 1963:1 See Figures 4 and 5). Chief Justice Korsah was sacked after he acquitted former Nkrumah associates accused of involvement in plots against Nkrumah's life. Korsah's replacement duly found the accused persons guilty and handed down sentences. Nkrumah's political opponents

were of course, not actual devils, rats or enemies of Ghana. They appeared in the cartoons as such because they were so labeled by the logic of Nkrumahism and because their desire for acceptance and reward made it possible for the cartoonists to marginalize reality and say what they were expected to say by the powers that be.



Figure 4



Figure 5

The assassination attempts against Nkrumah's life in the early sixties were a backlash against Nkrumah's increasingly dictatorial tendencies and policies. From 1958 when the Preventive Detention Act (PDA) was passed, an

increasing number of Nkrumah's critics were targeted for arbitrary arrest and detention. The promulgation of the Republic in 1960 and Nkrumah's increasing foreign policy shift away from the capitalist towards the socialist bloc signified a tightening of the noose against political freedoms and represented steps towards the single party state which eventually came into being in 1964 (See Bretton 1966; Fitch/Oppenheimer 1966; Nugent 2009: 10). Dennis Austin (1964: 48) writes that "the immediate effect of Nkrumah's shift towards autocracy was a melancholy succession of plots, reprisals, attempts at assassination, and repression".

By delegitimizing political dissent, Nkrumah created an "environment of uncertainty in which routine opposition (and well-meaning criticism) could often be conceived as malice and sabotage" (Ryan 1970: 155). By forcing the opposition and all critical voices out of legitimate politics, Nkrumah turned Ghana from what the sociologist C. Wright Mills calls a "society of publics" where people freely expressed their opinions, to "a mass society" where people were reduced to little more than silent audiences condemned never to reply in critical terms to the pronouncements of the powerful (Mills 1972: 353). Nkrumah therefore left his critics with no choice but to revert to the use of force to make statements on the future of their country. His followers meanwhile did what they did best, sing his praises and portray him as the formidable and infallible "Messianic Dedication Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah" among many other flattering appellations (*Accra Evening News*, February 3, 1963: 2).

Hagiographic Nkrumah

A third category of cartoons depicts Nkrumah himself. Found exclusively in the pre-coup pages of the *Accra Evening News*, these are not cartoons in the normal sense of the term. They are the direct obverse of the cartoon as critique. They are not inspired by the anger or activism that animates classical cartoonists. They are in fact songs in praise of The Leader, highly inflated hagiographies and adulations of Nkrumah that almost deify him:

One cartoon shows him as Christ on a pedestal, surrounded by a circle of light, his right arm raised in blessing as the crowds below wondered at the unbelievable glory. One man in the crowd says “Where am I? In Jericho, London or Utopia?” Another man retorts: “Are you a stranger here? Rip-Van-Winkle! This is Ghana which Nkrumah founded!” Another shows him glittering in the skies as the “Star of Africa” (*Accra Evening News*, January 1, 1963: 6. See Figure 6)

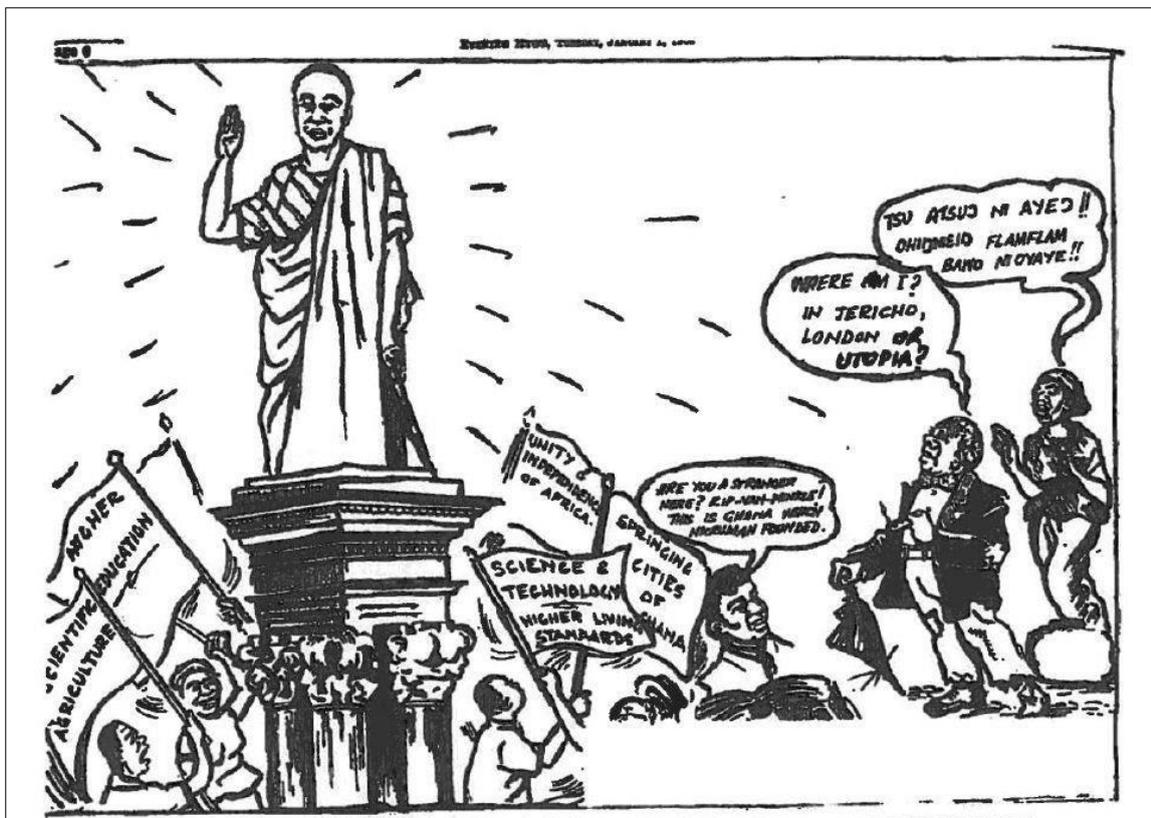


Figure 6

A particularly interesting cartoon depicts a broadly smiling Nkrumah, draped in traditional Ghanaian attire and holding a little lamb. Below it the cartoonist comments: “Osagyefo, the Good Shepherd. The Nation’s Fount of Honor” (*Accra Evening News*, July 13, 1963. See Figure 7). In other cartoons, Nkrumah is depicted variously as “Africa’s Man of Destiny” (*Accra Evening News*, July 1, 1961: 12. See Figure 8); “Hero of African redemption” (*Accra Evening News*, March 21, 1963: 5), and “Worker No. 1” (*Accra Evening News*, May 1, 1963: 6)..



Figure 7



Figure 8

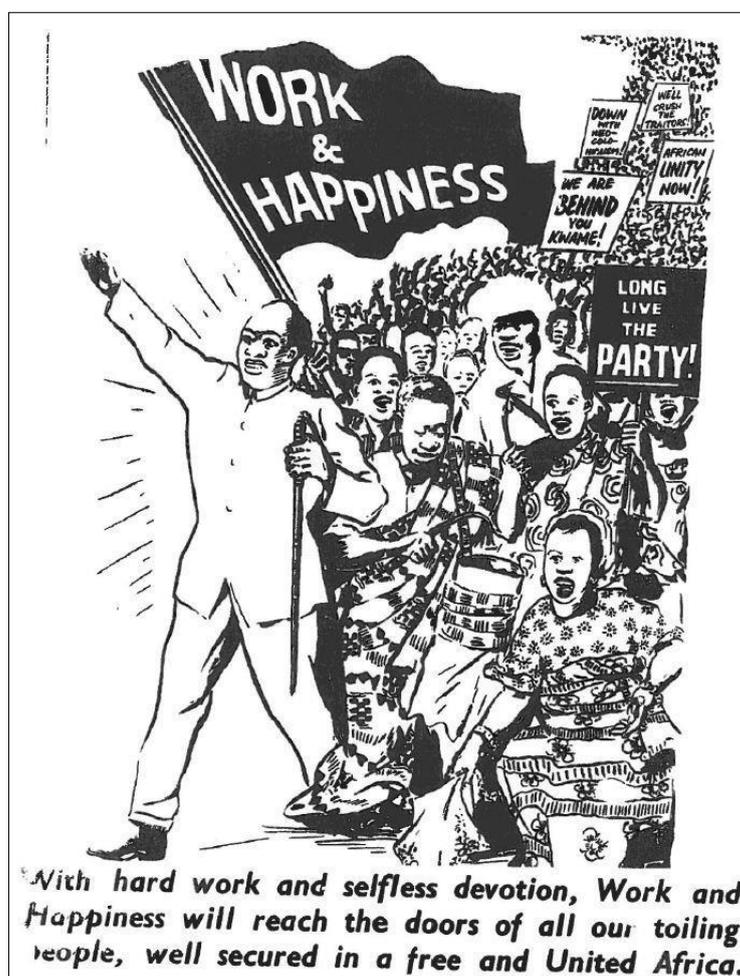


Figure 9

One cartoon shows him leading a crowd of workers on the march towards “Work and Happiness” (*Accra Evening News*, February 11, 1966. See Figure 9): Nkrumah, the Pan-African revolutionary and global strategist, was also a constant presence on the *Accra Evening News*. A 1963 cartoon shows him cheerfully leading a group of African leaders – including a delighted Jomo Kenyatta and his signature fly whisk – towards eventual African unity as a European man flees the scene (*Accra Evening News*, November 5, 1963. See Figure 10). Another cartoon shows him using the broom of “African Revolution” to sweep away Neo-colonialism, Apartheid, Racialism and Imperialism as a happy-faced UN looks on (*Accra Evening News*, February 3, 1965: 2. See Figure 11). In a cartoon published exactly one month before he was overthrown, Nkrumah is depicted as a doctor diagnosing World Problems (*Accra Evening News*, January 24, 1966).

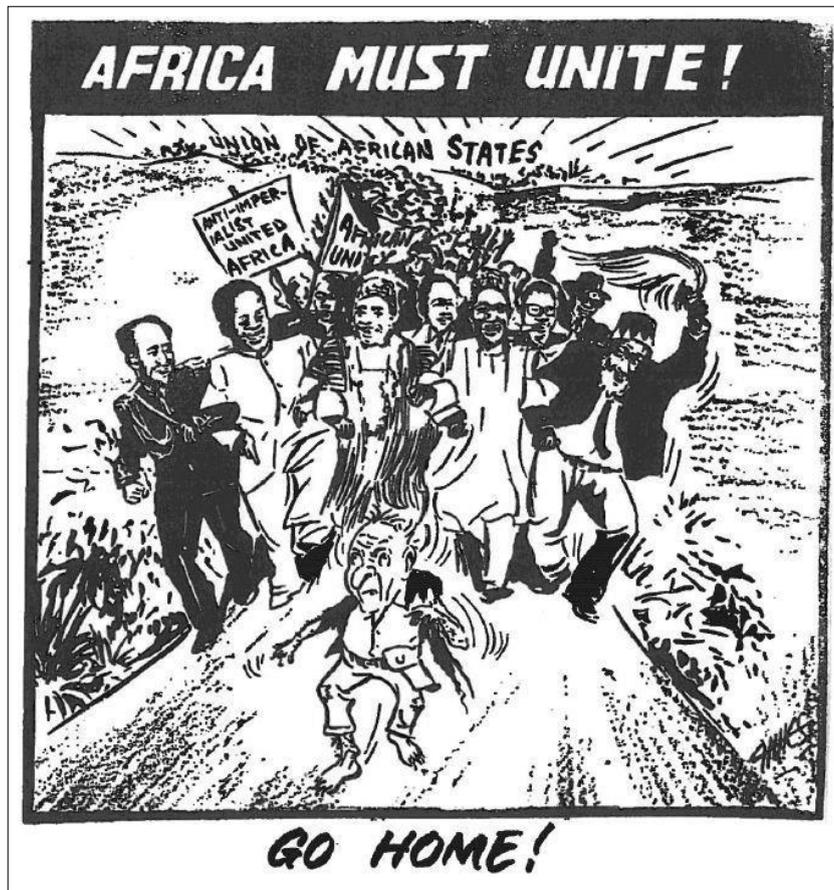


Figure 10



Figure 11

At this time, Nkrumah was finalizing arrangements to make his ill-fated trip to Vietnam ostensibly to try mediating in the Vietnam War. Most of these hagiographic depictions of Nkrumah placed him high above mundane political battles. As a saint, a fount of honor, a man of destiny, the star of Africa, and doctor of world problems, Nkrumah was presented as being too high to be challenged by the ordinary mortals of Ghanaian opposition. It was suggested through these hagiographic representations that those who opposed or disagreed with Nkrumah must be of the devil's party and did not deserve to be treated with any kind of respect or moderation. However, the evidence suggests that Nkrumah was so highly elevated in the media only because the cartoonists were in pursuit of their own personal desires and because Nkrumah and the CPP were in a position to fulfill or deny such desires. As soon as he fell from power, he ceased to be a fulfiller of desires and thus an object of adulation in the *Accra Evening News*.

The last favorable depiction of Nkrumah in the *Accra Evening News* was a Monday, February 21, 1966 front page shot of the Ghanaian leader broadly smiling and waving a small handkerchief. The lead caption read "THE LEADER LEAVES FOR HANOI" (*Accra Evening News*, February 21, 1966: 1. See Figure 12). The short story reported that Nkrumah left for Hanoi that morning on a friendly visit to the Republic of North Vietnam at the invitation of President Ho Chi Minh.



Figure 12

The story also reported what was most certainly the last major act Nkrumah performed as head of state: he had set up a three-man Presidential Commission to run the country in his absence. An “executive instrument published in Accra” that morning, named the members of the Presidential Commission as “Nana Freku the third, President of the Western Region House of Chiefs, Mr. N. A. Welbeck, Minister of State for Party Propaganda and Opanyin Kwame Poku, National President, United Ghana Farmer’s Co-operative Council” (*Accra Evening News*, February 21, 1966: 1).

The composition of the commission perhaps raised some eyebrows in Ghana, but few anticipated that three days later, a combined military-police coup dubbed “Operation Cold Chop” would topple the Nkrumah regime. News of his overthrow reached Nkrumah on a stopover in Peking, China. And suddenly, Nkrumah the saint became Nkrumah the devil on the cartoon pages of the *Accra Evening News*. No longer capable of fulfilling the cartoonists' desires for acceptance and security, Nkrumah no longer merited praise singing. He now became what the new rulers said he was – a dictator and tyrant of the worst sort.

Effects of the coup d'état on the representation of Nkrumah and his associates

In the March 1, 1966 issue of the *Accra Evening News*, Nkrumah is depicted by the cartoonist Ghanatta as “Nkrumah – The Vicious Octopus”, his tentacles firmly wrapped around basic commodities, liberty, democracy, justice, wealth, confidence, free voting, and free expression; a near-naked Ghana stands bound hand and feet in a corner lamenting “oh, my possessions” (*Accra Evening News*, March 1, 1966: 1. See Figure 13).

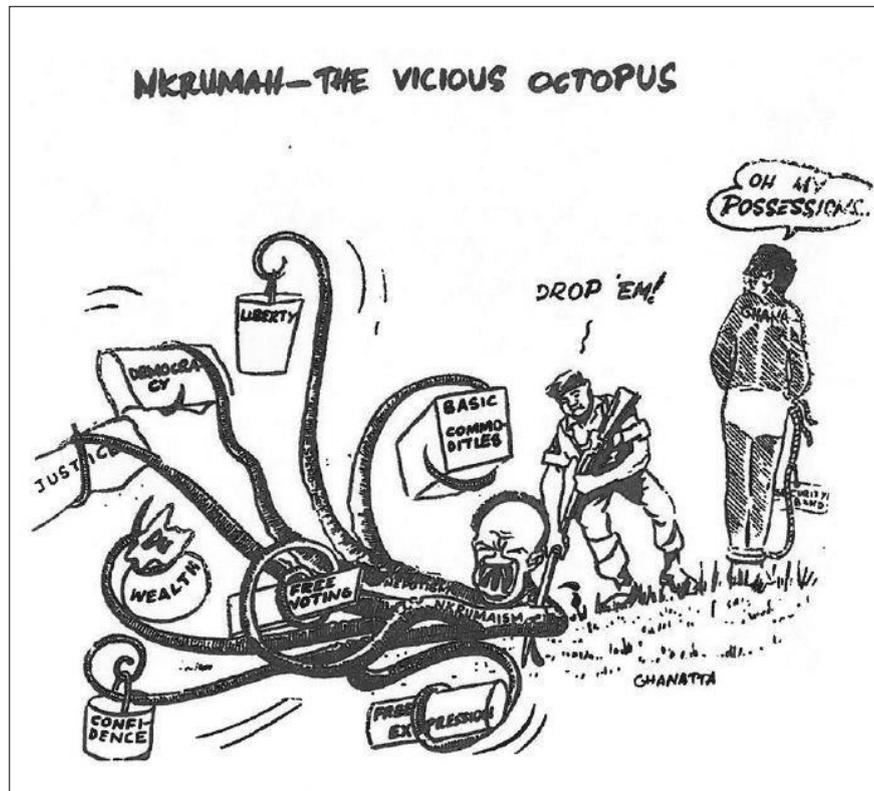


Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15

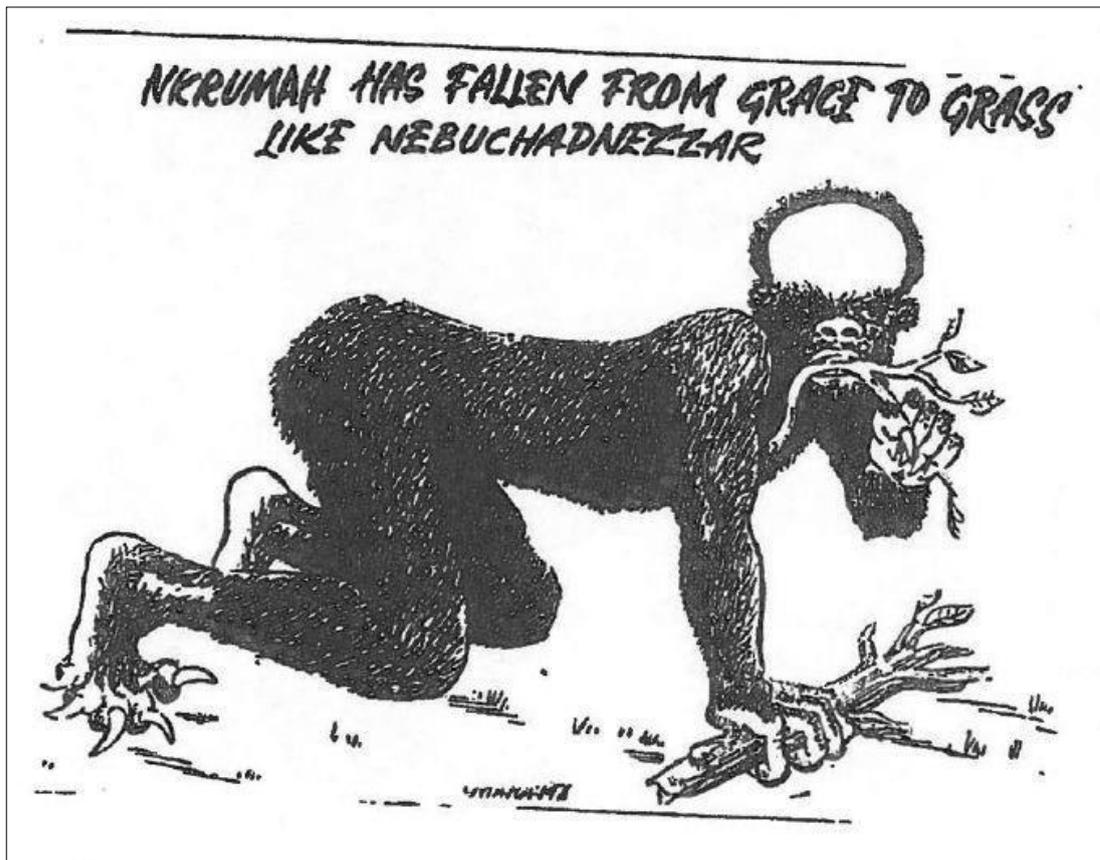


Figure 16

In the next issue, Nkrumah is depicted as a giant scaled snake with dragon claws tightly wrapped around a screaming Ghana (*Accra Evening News*, March 2, 1966: 1. See Figure 14). In another issue, Nkrumah is depicted as a giant rat greedily perched on the “remains of Ghana’s wealth” as Ghana sat tightly bound and blindfolded on a nearby chair (*Accra Evening News*, June 20, 1966). Yet another cartoon depicts Nkrumah as a naked devil, a rope around his waist held by a soldier leading a crowd of men, women and children chasing him as he tried to escape with State Funds (*Accra Evening News*, March 4, 1966: 1. See Figure 15).

He is also depicted in this category as a naked devil worshipper, a disciple of *Kankan Nyame* – a famous oracle in Kankan, a region in nearby French Guinea - and a playboy gleefully handing over bags of cash to his alleged numerous girlfriends. In one particularly telling cartoon titled “NKRUMAH HAS FALLEN FROM GRACE TO GRASS LIKE NEBUCHADNEZZAR”, Ghanatta depicts the fallen Ghanaian leader as a hairy creature on all fours, a branch clenched between his front teeth (*Accra Evening News*, May 3, 1966: 1. See Figure 16). Another cartoon shows him arriving in tears at Conakry Airport and Sekou Toure consoling him with the words, “Don’t worry, I will make you president of Guinea” (*Accra Evening News*, March 26, 1966: 1. See Figures 17 and 18).

All cartoons in this category were done by Ghanatta, a cartoonist who authored some of the most hagiographic of the pre-coup depictions of Kwame Nkrumah. Ghanatta appears to have been the *Accra Evening News*’ “editorial cartoonist” in the months leading up to and immediately after the coup. What Ghanatta really thought of Nkrumah is impossible to tell from his work. Nkrumah certainly was no octopus, or devil, or rat; he was certainly not a hairy creature on all fours. Here again, Lacan is proven right.

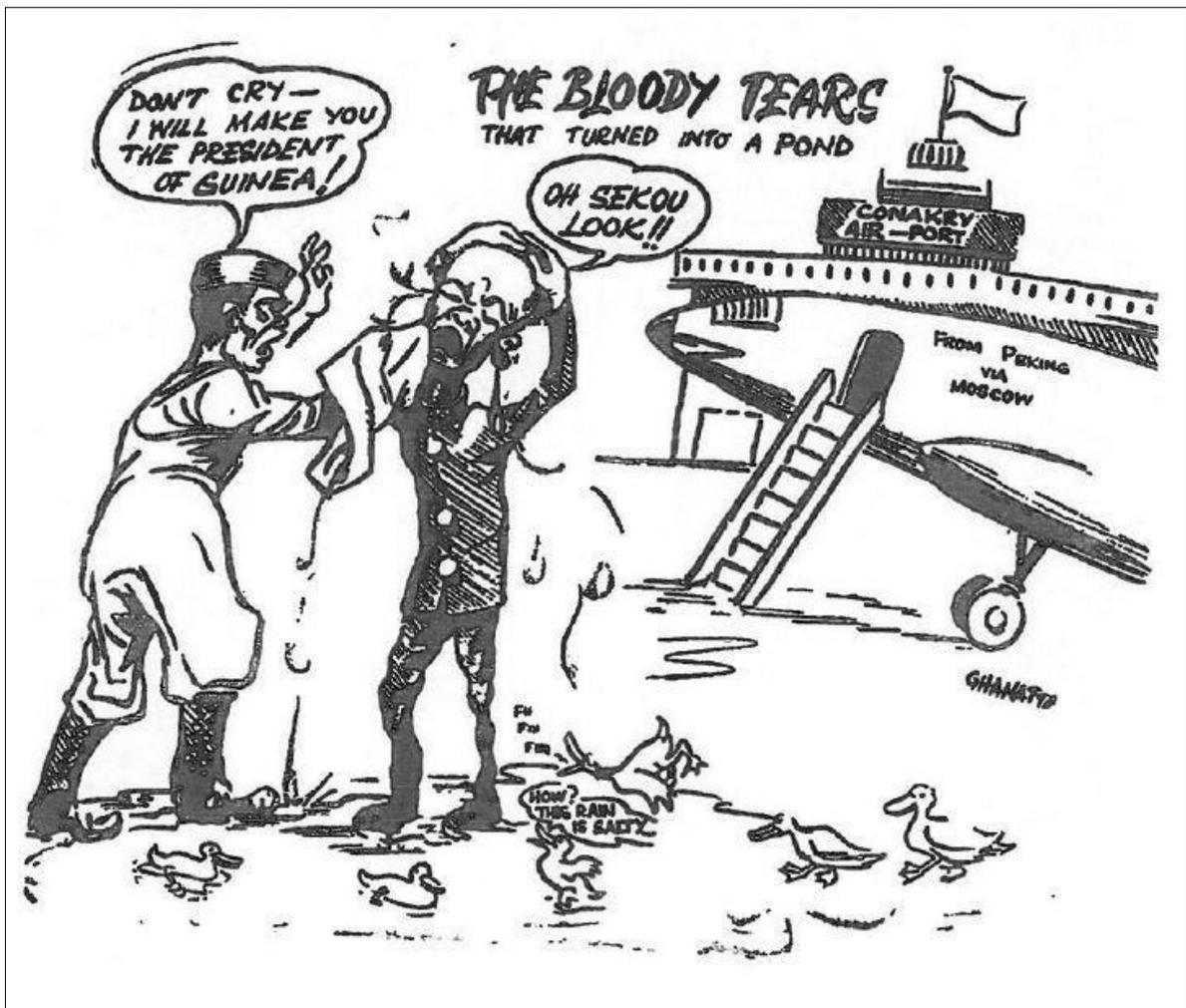


Figure 17

The cartoonist's desire to find acceptance and security from the new regime, and to join in the near universal condemnation of Nkrumah that greeted his fall in Ghana trumped reality. Depictions of Nkrumah both before and after the coup were "commercialized", and commercialized art does not always elevate or enlighten about that which they represent except in a very indirect manner, in a manner of critical interpretation.

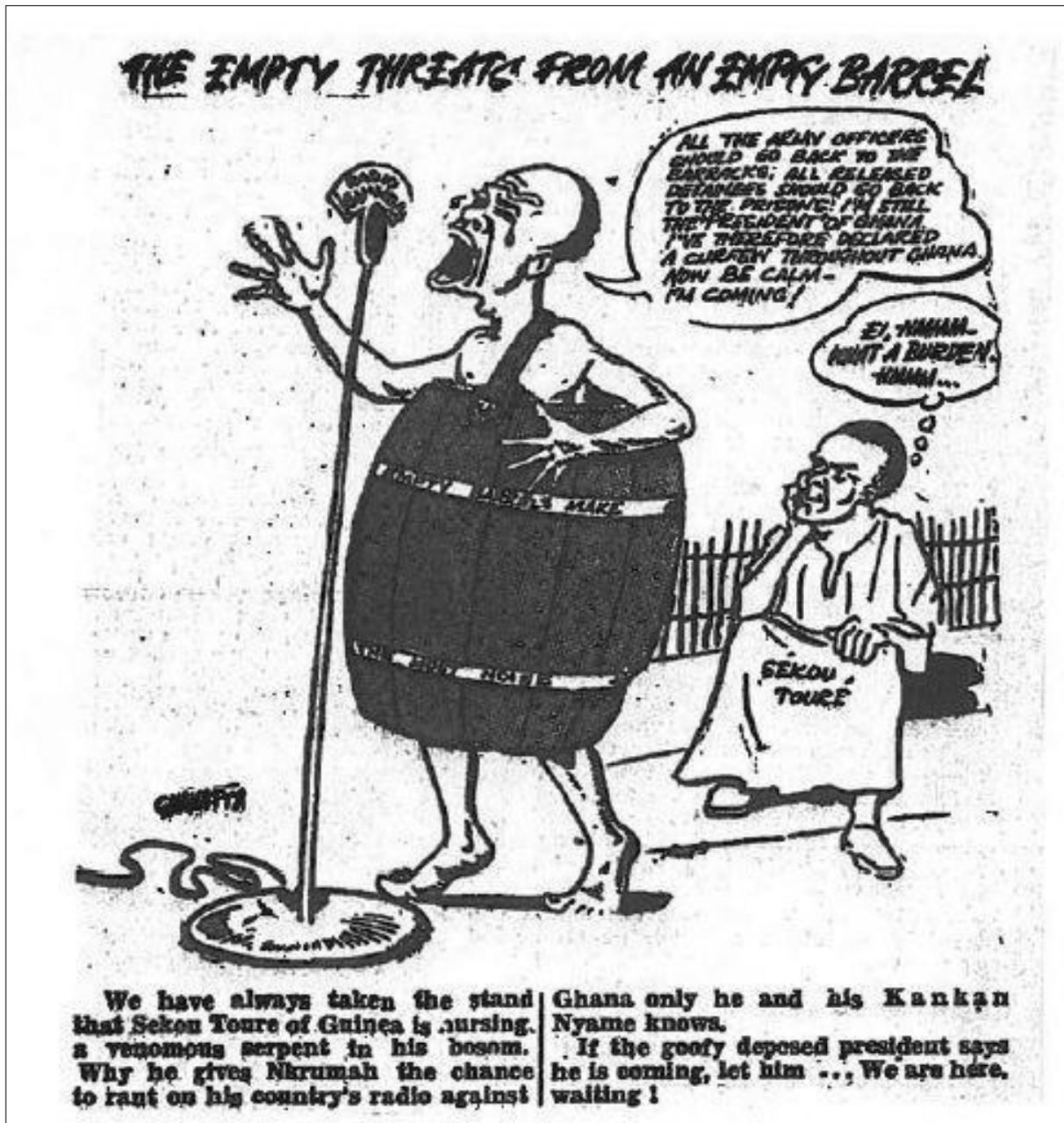


Figure 18



Figure 19a

Also found exclusively in the post-coup period is another category of cartoons, one depicting Nkrumah's former associates. While the pre-coup hagiographic cartoons rarely if ever featured a minister or some other important person in good standing in the Nkrumah party or government, the post-coup cartoon narratives are crowded by key associates of the former president. The former "minions" of "The Chosen One" now joined him in the visual mud. Among many former Nkrumah associates depicted in this category are N. A. Welbeck, Kwaw Swanzy, Isaac Amihere, Kofi Baako, Techie Menson, Krobo Edusei, and Ayeh Kumi. They are all depicted as corrupt and willing stooges of Nkrumah, some on the run, some begging for mercy, some dressed as women trying to escape, some hiding under the bed, some walking out of prison only to be slapped with "further charges" and all as "C.P.P. Wolves in Sheep's Skin" (Accra Evening News, June 23, 1966: 1. See Figures 19a and 19b).

However, the satiric depictions of his former associates come nowhere near the ugly light in which Nkrumah himself was rendered after February 24,

1966. For the cartoonists, the battle was now for the hearts and minds of the new regime and its supporters, those who could fulfil their desire for acceptance and security.

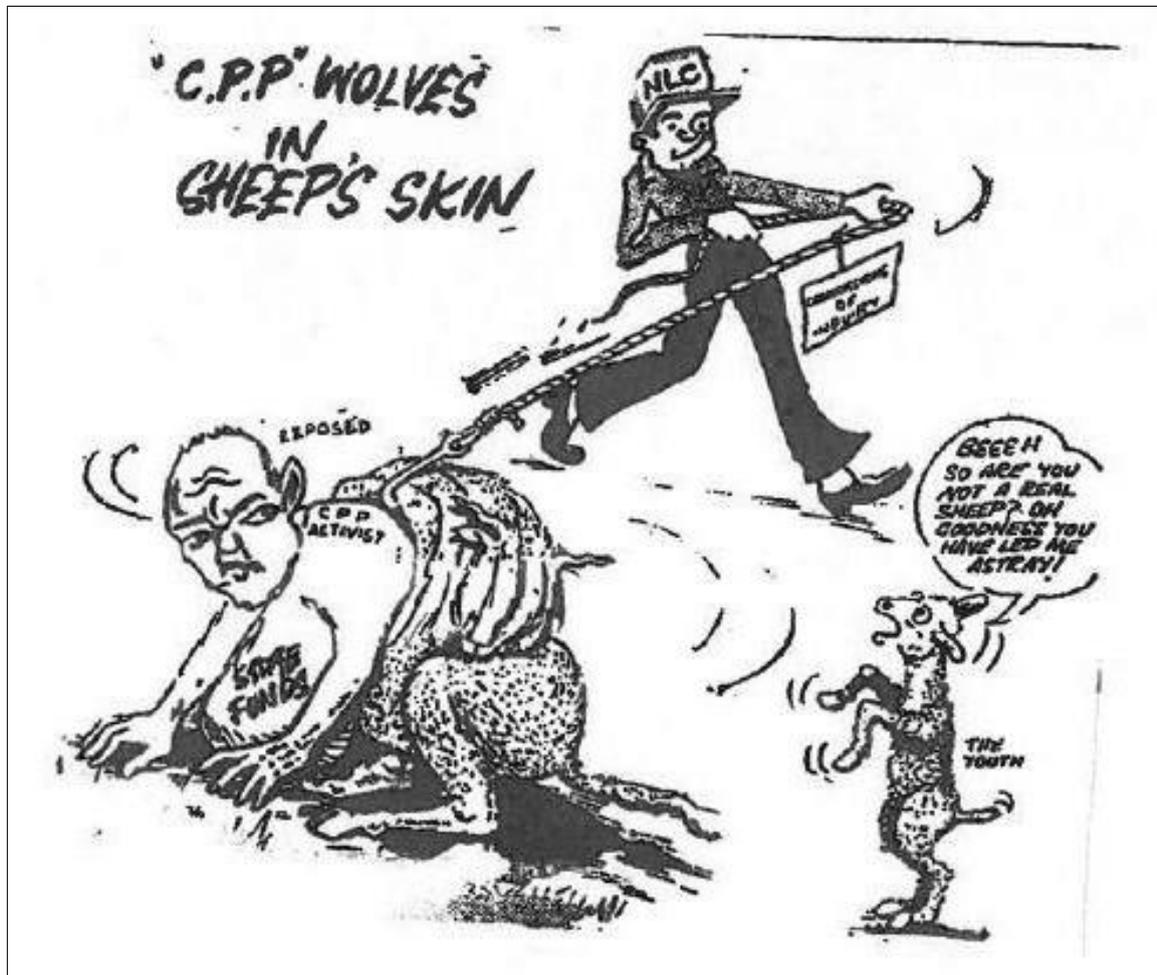


Figure 19b

Conclusion

The dramatic change of cartoon narratives from highly inflated hagiographies on Nkrumah before he was overthrown to the extremely harsh depictions of the same man after the coup raises some profound questions on the nature of historical knowledge, on the workings of power,

and on people's incredible capacity to trade allegiances or say what they do not mean.

A chapter in Achille Mbembe's *On the postcolony* (2001) titled "The Thing and Its Doubles" examines the extent to which political cartoons satirizing Cameroonian president Paul Biya are a true, if not obvious reflection of his actual personality. The cartoons studied by Mbembe are of the classical satirical type, similar to the post-coup depictions of Nkrumah in Ghana. Their main difference with the Nkrumah cartoons is that they depicted a sitting president in unfavorable light, right under his nose. Such a scenario was impossible in Nkrumah's Ghana both because it would have been drastically punished the first time and because by 1961, all newspapers in the country were state-owned and could only sing the praises of the government. It would be simplistic to suggest that all newspaper journalists in an all-state-owned media environment are sycophants. But if they must express themselves, they must do so in terms complimentary to the state. They could not express views critical of the government if for the mere fact that the editor would not publish them and they could find themselves without a job and behind bars in a minute. In Nkrumah's Ghana, such a "crime" was punishable by preventive detention under the PDA.

In one pre-coup cartoon, as he got ready to make his fateful trip to Vietnam, Ghanatta depicts Nkrumah as the doctor of world problems (*Accra Evening News*, January 24, 1966: 4). In a post-coup cartoon, Ghanatta shows Nkrumah gleefully handing over bulging bags of cash to a ring of fashionable ladies and comments, "Nkrumah's extravagant gifts to his many girl-friends earned him the title 'Show-Boy'" (*Accra Evening News*, April 19, 1966: 1. See Figure 20). Since Show Boy was one of Nkrumah's earliest titles, Ghanatta must have known of his extravagant gifts to fashionable ladies for a long time, since the early fifties at least, when Nkrumah was prime minister.



Figure 20

What can be said with a degree of certainty is that different historical spaces generate different political cartoons (Westin 1979). Inevitably, the nature of the cartoons produced in any particular historical period must necessarily draw from and reflect existing social conditions. While he was in power, Nkrumah's totalizing politics left no room for cartoons critical of him or his methods of rule. Those who had to draw cartoons to earn a living had to produce work that had a chance of being accepted by the editors of state-controlled newspapers like the *Accra Evening News* which by 1961 were, incidentally, the only newspapers published in Ghana. If the cartoonist Ghanatta and his colleagues felt differently than their hagiographic depictions of Nkrumah in the pre-coup days would suggest, they could not and did not publicly demonstrate this in their works. Any negative thoughts they had about Nkrumah could only come out after his overthrow.

The question then arises: Does the desire for acceptance and survival warrant the enduring suppression of true emotion in favor of fictional adulation of the disliked? Lacan (1998: 108) would say yes, for “in its relation to desire, reality appears only as marginal”.

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