CONVERSATION · NYBALF 2025

Howard W. French: The Second Emancipation

Howard W. French in conversation with Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún

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In conversation with Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún at The Africa Center in Harlem, Howard W. French discusses The Second Emancipation, his history of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, and of the Pan-African movement Nkrumah came to embody. French explains how he came to the subject, from his first journeys into Ghana from Ivory Coast in the 1970s to his parents' membership of a Friends of Ghana society in Washington, and traces the chain of chances that took Nkrumah from a village school to Achimota College, into the orbit of Nnamdi Azikiwe, and on to Lincoln University and Harlem.

French describes Pan-Africanism as a relay race passed back and forth between Africa and the Americas, and the present quarrels between Africans and African Americans as the fruit of a long campaign to divide. The conversation covers Nkrumah's private life and his marriage to an Egyptian wife as a symbolic union of the continent, his turn to personal rule in a state left without a civil service, the Kennedy administration and the Akosombo Dam, and Nigeria's "big-country complex". Audience questions address a journalist writing history, China in Africa, neocolonialism, Thomas Sankara, Nkrumah's support for liberation movements across the continent, and Benin's law offering citizenship to members of the African diaspora.

CONTENTS

0:00 Introduction
2:21 Why Nkrumah
8:05 Africans and African Americans: a relay race
20:00 Nkrumah's private life
25:40 Idealism, authoritarianism and the Akosombo Dam
34:15 America, the Cold War and African interests
40:10 Azikiwe, Nigeria and the big-country complex
46:27 Audience questions: a journalist writing history
52:57 Audience questions: China and Africa
58:06 Audience questions: neocolonialism
1:04:15 Sankara and the open road
1:07:58 Audience questions: Pan-Africanism across regions
1:13:01 Audience questions: returning to Africa

0:00

Introduction

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 0:07

Welcome everyone. Thank you for being here for this important conversation with the author of The Second Emancipation: Nkrumah, Pan-Africanism, and Global Blackness at High Tide. I asked him earlier and he hasn't answered me. Maybe he will during the conversation why the title of the book simply wasn't Nkrumah because it's a story of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president first leader and how his rise his work his life intersects both with the rise of Pan-Africanism on the continent and a lot of the struggles that Americans African-Americans were also dealing with here. So in some way it's a biography of the man and in some way it's a study of the relationship between Africa and the African diaspora which I which makes the book a very important one and a fascinating read that I couldn't put down until I got to the end. So thank you for coming and thank you for writing the book.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 1:26

It's a pleasure to be here. Really is and good to see all of you on a late Sunday afternoon.

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 1:33

So, let me read a little of your biography. Howard French is a professor of journalism at Columbia University and a former New York Times bureau chief for Central America and the Caribbean, West and Central Africa, Japan and the Koreas and China based in Shanghai. The author of six books including Born in Blackness. French lives in New York City. Your background already explains why you might why you had access to many of this phenomenal important details about Nkrumah your time in Africa your time in all these places but what I wanted to start with is what moved you towards this particular subject and what has it been like researching and putting everything together to be able to get arrive at this moment.

2:21

Why Nkrumah

HOWARD W. FRENCH 2:24

Thank you, Kọ́lá. You've asked me a very difficult question to begin with. Difficult because it requires me to draw on lots of different things. Right. So part one of the answer has to do with my biography. Both near-term and narrow and longer term and deep. Near-term and narrow. When I was in college just entering college, my family moved to West Africa. We lived in west in Ivory Coast and this sort of initiated a period of discovery of West Africa and then of Africa more broadly for me. Ivory Coast, as is right next door to Ghana. And I recount the beginning of the book. Some of my earliest experiences in West Africa were traveling to Ghana from Ivory Coast overland.

Very common transportation at a difficult time for Ghana and kind of being exposed then, and we're talking about the 1970s, to the Nkrumah story. This would be the afterlife of Nkrumah, roughly a decade after he was overthrown. And I had studied, you would say, in the British style. I had read African politics in school. And so I knew the formal history of Nkrumah, but now I was encountering the living history of Nkrumah and kind of coming to terms then already way back in this period of my life with the kind of the changing ways in which Ghanaians and then more broadly Africans in general were dealing with the memory and legacy of Nkrumah. So I had that germ in me from a very long time back.

I said there was a deeper biography. When I was a baby, my parents who lived in Washington DC were members of a Friends of Ghana society. And I didn't learn about this until, of course, not as a baby, but as a young man and that was another source of sort of fire, if you will, in terms of my interest in this subject. And it kind of eventually in a very circum sort of twisted way over time put me on the trail of one of the major threads of the book which is the ways in which African-American history which is American history and African history the deep ways in which they're intertwined. You know some of these are obvious the most obvious being the transatlantic slave trade.

But I learned initially through my parents' experience and stories of that time from them about how exciting the independence of Ghana was for African-Americans in the late 1950s. And so that was a piece of motivation for me in terms of coming back to this story. Just to be brief, the third I'm cutting out lots of other possibilities here, but the third answer really is goes to my editor and my edi I have the good fortune to have an editor who I admire and get along well with. And as I was nearing completion of my last book, Born in Blackness, which is kind of the history of the last 500 or 600 years from an African and Africanist perspective, he began to prod me to write a book about Nkrumah.

I didn't understand this at first. He said, "Help me find someone who can write a book about Nkrumah." I kept offering him names. And he would never tell me any followup about, I serious names. And he finally said to me after four or five of these conversations, he says, "Howard, don't you understand what I'm saying to you? I'm asking you, would you please write a book about Nkrumah for me?" and initially I was not immediately inclined to do this partly because I thought I knew the Nkrumah story well enough. You never know anybody's story completely, but for the reasons I just explained to you, I thought I knew the story well enough. But out of respect for him, I began to scratch around and do some serious research and boom, my eyes became open like barn doors to dimensions of this history that I didn't know, that I didn't understand.

I could have sketched a pretty competent brief history of Nkrumah already back then, but wow, the story became so rich and so deep when I applied myself seriously to it and so I didn't need any further convincing and that's the answer.

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 6:49

Thank you. You know, I thought I knew Nkrumah myself and that was silly because all I knew was just, it was always synonymous with pan-Africanism. Fela always sang about Nkrumah as the champion, and Femi Kuti and most conscious artist in Nigeria mentioned him all the time. So that became the only

thing I thought of whenever I heard his name. But reading the book and just shortly into the book, I realized that who he was at the time and the people who encountered him was what we think of as Mandela was during our own time. And because he led a country that was small, not the size of Nigeria, to get out of the clutches of a big empire like the British Empire and secured self-rule for his country in a way that inspired so many other people.

Not just that, he had the goal to unite the whole continent. You know what a dream of for a state of that size. So I found the book very rich richly rewarding in telling in giving me a lot of background information, but you also then mentioned a lot of contradictions and what affected the way he's remembered now in hindsight.

8:05

Africans and African Americans: a relay race

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 8:05

Let's focus a little bit about the conversation between African-Americans and the African continent. And something I found really fascinating not just with Nkrumah but with many other leaders like Azikiwe whom you mentioned a lot was that they had they were first influenced by the United States then they went to Africa and through their successes then inspired African-Americans doing important things. Why do you think it's important to highlight that relationship that conversation and how do you think it will help the conversations that we're having today on Twitter, social media, on in the news etc. Which if you have been following is can be quite contentious. The relationship the way we see each other either it's it seems like we don't we don't know enough or there has been a gap between the knowledge of what was and where we find ourselves today.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 9:04

Another rich question here. I already

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 9:07

Take it wherever you like.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 9:09

I already sin by excess in my answers. So let me start in a different place. You asked me before we began why I didn't simply name the book Nkrumah and the one piece of the answer to that is this is really an intellectual history of a very rich and busy movement which whose label is Pan-Africanism and which has deep roots in Africa and in the United States and elsewhere in the diaspora that I was only dimly aware of them and I knew of the most famous people but I didn't really understand just how elaborate the literature and the patterns of activism were around Pan-Africanism and going back almost to in the case of the diaspora to the very beginnings of the postbellum meaning after the civil

war period in the United States Pan-Africanism was even if it didn't yet have that name was alive already as an idea and I'm Not talking about the dream of founding fathers of the United States and others of the American elite to send African derived people back to Africa.

I'm talking about the desire of black people in the United States themselves to somehow reconstitute their relationship with Africa if not altogether return to Africa. Right. So I'm starting here because you mentioned Azikiwe. I don't know if everyone here is familiar with Azikiwe. Nnamdi Azikiwe was the first president of Nigeria. Nkrumah's life has marked his development as a human being and as a eventually as a politician is marked by just the most extraordinary string of coincidences. Nkrumah is born in the furthest corner southwest corner of what becomes Ghana. It's right practically right on the border with Ivory Coast. And it's was a really neglected area. Ghana itself, the Gold Coast at the time had received almost no investment in education from Britain as a colony even though it was the second leading source of foreign exchange for Britain of all Britain's colonies late in the colonial period.

Just think of that combination of facts. Okay. Nkrumah's mother. She's one of several she's a junior wife of his father, meaning he had several wives. He is her only child. He is not the father's oldest son. And the father at a time when education was extraordinarily rare and costly. She persuaded him of all of his children to send Nkrumah to school. So that's the first coincidence, having a mother of such force of character and will, right? And Nkrumah goes to school in a one room schoolhouse in the far western southwestern corner of Ghana, a Catholic run school, impresses immediately the priest who runs the school. There's a tour of some time later, not long afterwards, of that remote corner of the colony by a very senior British colonial official.

The headmaster, the priest tells the colonial guy, "You have to know, you have to see this kid." The colonial guy then says, "We need to send him to Accra. We're opening a quote unquote college," which it's really a boarding school, not a college in Accra, which was just then opening. So, this is another gigantic coincidence. And at the college. So, Nkrumah enters the first class of Achimota College, the first really serious school for advanced preparation, pre-college advanced education in the Gold Coast. And in Accra Nkrumah falls under the sway of two extremely important characters to his life. The first of them is the only senior black educator at Achimota College. The second one is Azikiwe, who you've asked me about.

Azikiwe was not yet, of course, the president of Nigeria. He was a crusading newspaper man who had been to the United States, had been to school in the United States. He had gone to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, the oldest HBCU in the United States, the first to issue, I believe, I could be wrong on this, but I think the first or certainly one of the first to establish graduate education. Azikiwe had been to the United States for study Nkrumah falls under his influence. Azikiwe already through his writings is a very pro-independence taken a lot of risks a very pro-independent independentist-minded journalist editor and Nkrumah soaking all of this up. So from the head from the deputy headmaster of the school and from Azikiwe.

So this then sets Nkrumah on a course to I want to come back to your Africans versus African-Americans question, but I told you ask complex. Uh

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 14:20

It's all right. That's why we're here.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 14:24

So both the headmaster, the assistant headmaster and Azikiwe had been to the US to study. Extremely rare in British West Africa, right? The assistant headmaster had been to Columbia University where I teach and Azikiwe had been to Lincoln University. They persuade Nkrumah who has already been kind of identified as somebody who must go onward to higher education not to go to Britain where the very small numbers of elite sort of proto-political class type figures from the Gold Coast had been sent but to go to the United States. Okay. So all of those coincidences set Nkrumah on a path to come here and eventually to Columbia, I'm sorry, to Lincoln University. He lands in New York City first at a very fertile and effervescent time in the city.

You know, every street corner practically has some kind of political activism going on. And he is he has a Nigerian friend named Dumu who is his kind of guide to Harlem and he doesn't have a long initial stay in New York City. He comes back the next year and spends his summers working as a fish hawk selling fish on the street in Harlem. Which is a colorful little story I develop in the book. Anyway, so on to your question about the complicated relations between Africans and African-Americans, a few things. One of them is the history of Pan-Africanism. The history of this idea is a history of re of what you might think of as a relay race of the two sides of the Atlantic passing the baton back and forth and having each side at different moments of history take this leading role in terms of agency and energy and agenda driving in terms of pursuit of a dream of people of black descent working together joining forces lending their energies to each other toward the goal of freedom.

Toward the goal of citizenry, toward the goal of economic prosperity and independence, right? And if you go back to the mid-9th century, it become the pattern becomes very clear there are, sets of decades where the main drivers of the thought are in Africa and sets of decades where the main drivers of thought are in the Americas, mostly in the United States, right? A little bit in Britain also, but mostly in the United States, right? So it's true. There's this thing on social media. I'd say I would go beyond that. I, my wife is West African, my wife is from Ghana. There is a thing unfortunately that exists at some levels of society where Africans and African-Americans hold poorly informed and sometimes negative ideas about each other.

And all I want to say about this for the moment I'm welcome any further development of this topic is that this in my view my understanding is the fruit of a very long campaign with ancient roots that whose design is to divide and conquer to keep people down by preventing them from knowing really who they are and from identifying beyond petty kind of narcissistic identity bases, right? Oh, these are Africans or in Africa among Africans. Oh, those are Ghanaians or oh, those are Nigerians, right? Or oh, those are African-Americans. They don't know anything about Africa or those are Africans, they don't

I'm not one of them, right? This is a really unfortunate byproduct of deliberate action in terms of the education and socialization and the building of values through entertainment and the writing of history that has penetrated the minds of people of black descent everywhere.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 18:42

Thank you. Because I and I don't know how many people know this but a lot of African-American icons in the 60s moved to go live in Ghana because of the environment that Nkrumah had created and because of the way he had been perceived as the inspiration to whom one can look for ideas of liberation and freedom and one of the things you mentioned in the book was when he was overthrown much later spoiler alert from government. All the western press people were just, cussing him down. You know, he was this, he was that. They were happy to get rid of their social so-called socialist leader. We'll get into that too if we have some time.

But African-Americans sustained their own image of him as the leader and as this really revolutionary person. And so it's crazy today to think that there are people who have grown up without any knowledge of that kind of relationship that did exist between us and the African diaspora. But you've mentioned you've talked a little bit about that. So I'm going to move on.

20:00

Nkrumah's private life

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 20:00

You go into his personal life quite a bit and one particular subject I wanted to see if you could speak a little bit more about was that his I don't know you didn't say sexuality was questioned but you did imply that there were unusual behaviors in the way he related with women specifically. What did what's the conclusion you came to personally from your own research into his life even though he did eventually get married and have children?

HOWARD W. FRENCH 20:32

Sure. So I don't want I don't the audit I'm just assuming very few people here have read the book. So this is these are dangerous waters to tread into only because I would like to think I treat this topic with complexity and sophistication. You did. I would not adopt the word unusual to describe Nkrumah's sexual background or life. That would be a judgment on my part and I don't have any judgment of Nkrumah's choices in the matter. The first thing I would say though is Nkrumah was whatever you may conclude. I've laid out what I know about his life in the book in some detail, but most of the what most of this reality, this side of Nkrumah is unknowable.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 21:18

Yeah, you did.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 21:19

I worked very hard. It's unknowable, right? And so what I would say is that first and foremost and deliberately speak so Nkrumah was an extremely private person. Okay. Second thing I would say is I did not wish to insinuate not that I would judge him badly were this the case but I did not insinuate in any manner that Nkrumah was gay. Mhm. The element that throws people I think in examining what shall we call this Nkrumah's love life is this twofold thing going on or maybe more than twofold. On the one hand Nkrumah was an extremely charming man. Somebody toward whom women responded very powerfully over and over again.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌSÚN 22:20

Like all the time.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 22:23

Okay. On the other hand, Nkrumah seems to have developed based on the public evidence very few if any strong and lasting romantic relationships. Yeah, that's pretty much the extent of what I know. He had very deep and lasting emotional relationships with some women. But those women, the ones that we know about, were not women with which we have reason to believe he had romantic relations with. Yes. Alongside that, Nkrumah was a father. Yes. Twice, meaning by different women. Mhm. So, it's a complicated picture and one that doesn't lend itself to a quick summary, right? I mean, Nkrumah had a child before he left Ghana as a very young man to come to New York in 1935 doesn't get talked about very much.

He already had a child. Okay. And then when he comes back to Ghana and launches himself into politics and has this extraordinarily rapid ascent to power through his political genius. And Nkrumah I think my interpretation is he had a couple of motives here but I think he perceived you can imagine this in American politics very readily. There was there were headlines about this last week involving Cory Booker that Cory Booker is getting married because he wants to become president and you can't be a candidate viably speaking in America if you don't have a wife if you're not a man without a wife. Okay? So put that in the Nkrumah context Nkrumah early in his presidency arranges and that's the right verb to marry a woman from Egypt. Yes. Okay. He eventually has children with them, with her, but there's no sign of a deep emotional bond between the two of them.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌSÚN 24:25

They just arrived and they got married.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 24:27

It's totally arranged. She arrives. She He doesn't tell anybody ahead of time. Yeah. I know one of the children quite well actually. I've never asked her. I don't think it's appropriate. What am I going to ask her about her dad's what, right? But another motive and I think the his choice of an Egyptian wife, this came up in another recent talk of mine, I think is deeply interesting on a totally non a different storyline, not about his romantic or gender oriented or any of that, right? Why did he want an Egyptian wife?

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 25:03

It fits in the Pan-African views. Yeah. Nkrumah

HOWARD W. FRENCH 25:07

Wanted an Egyptian wife. I believe I argue in the book because he wanted symbolically to marry what the world had conspired to divide that is Africa between a supposed North Africa and an and a supposed black Africa that if I commit this political act of marrying a woman from Egypt I am bringing Africa together

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 25:33

As it should be

HOWARD W. FRENCH 25:35

And I think that's a magnificent thing. Thank you very much.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 25:38

Really great answer.

25:40

Idealism, authoritarianism and the Akosombo Dam

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 25:40

You highlight how Nkrumah's idealism clashed eventually with authoritarian practices. And I wanted to ask how you probably you argue that in the book of course how you interpret that either as a tragic flaw of visionaries typically or a structural problem of postcolonial societies. I think you lean towards the latter but I also want to see whether you think of it as a personal flaw as well.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 26:06

Kọ́lá, how can I handle these questions?

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 26:08

Because you did take pains to

HOWARD W. FRENCH 26:11

No, no, there's nothing wrong with what you've asked me. It's just that I don't know how to treat these things quickly. So Nkrumah, particularly in the last four years or so of his time in power veered increasingly in an authoritarian direction and by authoritarian in a in term in a direction of personalized rule. By the end he was president for life of Ghana. Okay. So if you're president for life wherever that may be that's already a gauge of something, right? I this I don't think this is where Nkrumah started out in terms of his political orientation. I think kind of the cleanest sort of nutshell explanation I can try to give for this is that Nkrumah finds himself almost miraculously the leader of

his country as it's being born and in charge of an entity that had undergone essentially no construction during the colonial period. If we understand construction to be toward a goal of modern nation statehood.

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 27:26

Loyal opposition. You mentioned

HOWARD W. FRENCH 27:27

Not just loyal opposition. He had no loyal opposition. His opposition was constituted by class enemies and by kind of narrow identity based political parties, right? And that never went away. But the problem the challenge that I was pointing to in most particularly was that there was no civil service to speak of in Ghana Nkrumah takes over. He wins independence for this new country and there's nothing there's no apparatus of state to speak of. There are no the British had not trained any senior civil servants u there's no bureaucracy and not much of anything else. It is an extractive colony that the British had milked for cocoa and gold for a long time. Milked to their great benefit without plowing anything back into it.

Right. And so Nkrumah begins to discover early and then this the horror of this I think sort of takes over his life that there are very few people that he can delegate to that he can call upon to do other things. And Nkrumah being an extraordinarily intelligent and competent person who is an ideas man and has charisma I think became persuaded partly by his own abilities partly by the necessity of the situation that if anything needs to be done he has to be directly involved in it himself. There's a tragedy in that because countries don't end up getting run well on that basis. However, if that's the background and you imagine yourself in the shoes of the leader, what is the alternative?

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 29:22

You don't have anyone to delegate to. It's a tragedy if you have to do everything. But what's in the middle? Yeah,

HOWARD W. FRENCH 29:29

There's nothing in the middle. Okay. So the second thing that happens is that from essentially from the beginning of the Kennedy J Kennedy presidency in the United States which coincides with the kind of beginning of the latter half of Nkrumah's time in power. Nkrumah was kept being strung along by the United States in terms of its possible support for Nkrumah's greatest economic agenda item which was the construction of Akosombo Dam in Ghana build making what in fact did become the world's largest man-made lake and the creation of a huge amount a huge capacity of hydroelectric power which Nkrumah was going to use to build industry in Ghana starting with aluminum because in Ghana had world-class bauxite reserves and that's where aluminum comes from you need a lot of electricity so Kennedy I think Kennedy I detail a lot about their relationship Kennedy Nkrumah had a surprisingly strong relationship is the first leader of any country in the world to visit the white house when Kennedy becomes president. Mhm.

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 30:49

And he met him at the airport, too.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 30:50

Yeah. Met him at the airport. You just never mind this administration. You can't imagine that with any other administration in the United States. Right. And Kennedy, I think partly because he was struck by Nkrumah, partly because he had his own strategy for waging the cold war, understood that Ghana was a had a powerful voice in Africa and that it made sense to work within Nkrumah even if he had reservations about socialism or whatnot. Right? However, Kennedy is surrounded by, and I'm not trying to I'm not trying to shield Kennedy from criticism here. There a lot of things to criticize Kennedy about. But Kennedy is surrounded by these national security types who every time Ghana, I'm sorry, and Nkrumah would say anything about socialism or about third worldism or about non-alignment, they would point to that and say to Kennedy, you see, we can't back this pro these this guy's projects.

The moment we supply something to him, he's going to stab us in the back and turn around and get in bed with the Soviet Union, right? And so this highlights so this is how Nkrumah lives his last years. Basically the Kennedy people delayed final approval for loan guarantees Nkrumah was not asking for a gift. Who were guarantees of loans to build this dam and the Kennedy people kept stringing him along and as this was happening the glo global cocoa prices collapsed and cocoa was Ghana's biggest source of foreign income at the time and so in the beginning 1961-62 Ghana's plunged into an economic crisis so already at the against the background of a budding kind of personality cult having to do everything himself the economy essentially begins to collapse and Washington is stringing him along.

And I think these things combine to drive Nkrumah's worst sort of feed the worst instincts of authoritarianism Nkrumah as a way of dealing with the crisis. Right. I just want to say one more thing. I can see you for you're forming another question which is appropriate. But the struggle, the thing I talked about with Kennedy is I would like the audience to think of the struggle of Nkrumah and then and the struggle of Africa to this very minute as a struggle of how to enter into modernity on its own terms. In other words, Nkrumah had this problem with the Kennedy people because Nkrumah was not willing to be anybody's boy. I'm not gonna say what you want me to say just so that you'll be happy about what I say.

I'm the leader of Ghana. I am an African. I'm driving a Pan-Africanist agenda. This is what we believe in. This is how we wish to modernize. And this was a struggle that Nkrumah never completely triumphed in because the forces arrayed against that kind of independent thinking were so powerful and that Africa to this very minute has never completely overcome.

34:15

America, the Cold War and African interests

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 34:15

Thank you very much. Yeah, the followup I was going to if you a few of them, but I think the way you ended gave me an opening to this curiosity I've had about many of these revolutionary leaders from Ho Chi Minh in, Vietnam to Patrice Lumumba in the Congo to Nkrumah. Many of them started out being inspired by American democracy and looked towards America first for almost everything they wanted and turned to others only after they've been spurned by America and its own paranoia about the Cold War. And yeah, I found that crazy. And what to what do you attribute America's own paranoia and resistance to embrace or support visionaries who have ideas that are similar.

Many of them look to America's confederation and the constitution to build their own society. The idea of America United States of Africa came from looking at the US. So what do you think is the cause of that and is there a way out because this person is trying to like you said build a continent or a country on his own terms and yet has to deal with this big behemoth who would rather support a dictator who tosses their line than a democrat who doesn't.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 35:41

I'm not sure where the question is in that.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 35:45

You take it wherever you like please.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 35:47

The United States is not a very generous place, right? And it has become less generous over time, over certainly the span of my lifetime. Okay. That's one associated with that is the notion that I think countries in general are constructed or oriented toward the pursuit of their own national interests and how you understand your own national interests of course can vary wildly. But most countries don't start out from thinking about how do I help other countries? Of course, right? What can I do to be nice to everybody else? Yeah. Right. You may have your favorite countries in the world, but I think it's a little bit naive, right, to think that the business that a top order of business for many countries in the world is helping other countries figure out how to how they can be better off.

Yeah. Right. That's just not unfortunately that's just not the world we seem to live in. Right. And so I think this points us in a certain direction and it's a direction that I think Nkrumah intuited perfectly well and that is Africa has to promote its own interests. It cannot wait. It cannot sit around hoping for the right confluence of circumstances, the right configuration of foreign powers. Country X Y or Z is gonna do certain things for us or with us and that's going to make everything work out for us. This is a kind of form of a delusion and Nkrumah is not in the grips of that delusion, right? While he was being strung along by the United States Nkrumah was talking to everyone else he could about Ghana's national and Africa's national interests, right, appropriately.

Yeah. Nkrumah believed and you were right to say so. I developed this a lot in the book too that America had provided an example to Africa in the sense of the way that its 13 original colonies came together to form a whole that was richer and more powerful than the than its parts might be otherwise separately. Right? And Nkrumah understand that understood that precociously and articulated it fantastically well. The problem is Nkrumah begins to push this idea of in the late 1950s other countries take inspiration from Ghana's independence. Suddenly there's this headlong rush toward independence and African countries quickly Africa being a highly balkanized continent. New governments sprouting up in Africa all over the place.

In 1960, that one year alone, 17 countries became independent in Africa. You know, new elites are popping up into place all the time. And the elites are thinking most of the time, how do we take care of our own narrow interests as opposed to how do we promote a bigger broader agenda? And therefore Nkrumah's idea never gained the kind of critical mass of traction that it needed in order to change the political disposition of the African continent. But his idea is right and I want to come back to the Africa African-American dichotomy that you mentioned earlier. The other thing that Nkrumah was right about is so there's two things. One of them is, and he wrote a book with this title, Africa must unite.

Yeah. The other thing is that Africans and the African diaspora are each other's greatest resource. And will always be each other's greatest resource. And the failure to mobilize from one side or the other that resource in a common project is a recipe for doom for both.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 40:08
Thank you. Thank you very much.

40:10

Azikiwe, Nigeria and the big-country complex

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 40:10
I have an easier question for you. Now this is about Azikiwe whom again I found out early in the book was a great reference point inspiration. I think he even wrote him a reference to go to Lincoln.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 40:26
He did.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 40:27
And for a Nigerian in 2025 written about Azikiwe in this way compared to how he's perceived today in Nigeria for his role been leading the country to independence of course and then the coup and then every other thing that happened. I was wondering well first how Ghanaians saw him Azikiwe as that kind of influence and how you saw Azikiwe as role in the end when he became president because I realized fell out with a number of his old colleagues but there you didn't return to that relationship between him and Azikiwe much later I don't know whether they did have a relationship when both became president but I also know that Nigeria didn't rush to join the organization the Pan-African idea

because being a bigger country we have our own resources we want to do whatever else we want to do. So how do you see that relationship and did you find any other interesting things in their later lives?

HOWARD W. FRENCH 41:25

So I risk losing some of the audience with this question. It's not a hard question. You're right. It's not

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 41:31

You should get the book.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 41:32

It's not all that complex but Nigeria is complex. Yes. Right. Azikiwe is the first president of Nigeria, but he's not president for very long and he's not a very powerful president.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 41:43

No, not at all.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 41:44

Right. So the problem really wasn't that so much that Nkrumah and Azikiwe fell out. That wasn't altogether the case. Azikiwe by that point was no longer you're right that Azikiwe did not rush to sign up to any agenda about Pan-Africanism because of largely because of utterly Nigerian phenomena. I'm going to take the liberty. I'm not Nigerian but I'm ahead. I'm going to try to speak like a Nigerian. Okay. Nigerians in that period and throughout much of their history have been wrapped up in their own Yes. Narcissistic dynamic. Yes. And the simplest version of this is this kind of continual power struggle that one sees in the first decades of independence and sees remnants of now of kind of regional rivalry.

And this really grabbed Nigeria, put it in a strangle hold in the first two decades of independence, right? With these three principal regions to be really simple about this, the north, the southwest, and the southeast. And each of them feeling like this was a life-or-death struggle to be, who's going to who's going to come out on top in Nigeria. Ultimately, there's a calamitous civil war in Nigeria. And this really spoils, I think, Nigeria's trajectory in a longer term sense because this is not a productive struggle. If it's going to be who's going to be in charge, is it going to be a Muslim from the north? Is it going to be Hausa or a Yoruba or an Igbo?

Right. That's a little bit of an oversimplific oversimplification but not too much. Right. Nigerians had and to some extent have I think it was implicit in one of your early questions. I'm going to try to speak like a Nigerian for real now. Who are these foolish people? Yeah.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 43:47

This small boy. Yeah. Yeah.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 43:50

You know Nigerians have a big country complex. Yeah. We are big.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 43:55

We are Nigeria.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 43:56

Yeah. You know, who are these other people to tell us we should join together with them? Yeah,

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 44:01

They should join with us.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 44:03

Exactly. Yeah. You know, it's a very Nigerian thing. And it is true that Nigeria is by the standards of Africa a very large country. What is not true is that Nigeria by itself has the scale to overcome the global dichotomies and hurdles that have been put in the place of Africa since even prior to independence. The problems that Nkrumah was pointing toward which said hey we have to put all that stuff behind us and find ways to make unity real. If we want to be serious in a hostile world, Nigerians because of their size, I love Nigeria. I love Nigeria deeply. But Nigeria's big, we are big complex, prevent Nigerians sometimes, too often I think from understanding how much bigger it would be if Nigerians could let go of that a little bit and be more African, right, in a Pan-Africanist sense.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 45:11

Thank you. Thank you very much. I will open to the audience to ask questions. Please raise up your hand if you do want to ask. But I like how you highlight many of these ironies in the book. Like you said, Ghana and Nigeria, two big English-sp speaking West African countries didn't quite get along in the way Nkrumah wanted. He had and but he found Guinea, which was a French-speaking country, to partner with in this idea and eventually had, died there. And again, the relationship that he built over the continent, with the African-American you ended it on that idea of Stokely Carmichael coming to live in Guinea and adopting the name of Kwame Nkrumah as his first name and Touré as his last name.

So I think you took it full circle and I thank you for writing such a complex and important book. So yes, you want to say something?

HOWARD W. FRENCH 46:09

Just want to say thank you. Yeah, I look forward to the question.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 46:13

Do we have any questions? Okay, there's somebody over there. Please introduce yourself and Oh, it's the lady in Okay, go ahead.

46:27

Audience questions: a journalist writing history

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 46:30

Go ahead. Go ahead. Please raise your hand if you want to ask questions so we can see you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1 46:38

My question, thank you so much for a rich conversation and for such rich answers. And my question has to do with just you as a writer and what you are maybe even your editor were envisioning by having you author this new book on Nkrumah. Within certain fields and Nkrumahism and Pan-Africanism are very worked over territory. And but that might be within a certain world and as a with a as a kind of a jer someone with a journalistic background who may have a larger audience. Is there something strategic about having you author a new book on Nkrumah?

KỌLÁ TÚBỌSÚN 47:39

Go ahead.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 47:40

Again, I'm not sure I completely get the question part of the question. You put you seem to stress the you and I don't know what you mean what you intend to suggest there. Um

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1 47:53

I think I'm I think most people I'm thinking about I'm a historian. So within the discipline of history and African history, Nkrumah and the history behind Africanism are one of the more widely covered topics. As a nonhistorian, even though this is a historically kind of reflective work, I imagine that the audience is maybe different than a historian would reach. That's what I'm trying to get at. But if there are other ways I want to about it in that sense.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 48:27

Let me say a couple of things. One of them is I have had a certain evolution in my life as a writer. I began as you said as a journalist. I love journalism. I teach journalism. I still perform journalism. But if you look at the trajectory of my books, they have tended steadily in an ever more historic direction. And that began before my last two books which are explicitly and about Africa. I'll just leave it that way. I wrote my previous two books were about China and there were one of them in particular was it's on the table there is a work of history. I don't I don't feel any personally speaking I don't feel any conflict about this.

I don't feel any kind of special power attaches to titles like this but why not? I feel like I there are other plenty of nonacademic historians who write history right that's just a fact. So there's that. Secondly, I make it I would not want to write a book that even places its toes in the pond of history without feeling that I had written something that even people who were specialized in my topic didn't learn something from. I gave a lecture and I just I would never I've never said this in a public forum before, but it's appropriate to your question. I gave a lecture about my last book at Yale early on after the book came out and a Yale historian said a version of your question who are you to write a you didn't say this exactly but like who are you?

What like what is this? You who are you? You're not a historian. You're writing a book like what do you have why should we think you have anything to say about this? Yeah. He had not read my book. He wrote me an email six weeks later and said, "I'm ashamed of my question. I learned a tremendous

amount from your book and I'm very happy that you wrote it." Okay. So, that's kind of my goal. I don't expect a letter from all of my historian readers, right? But I do write from a perspective that would not be satisfied if people who are specialized in the topic, they may know some of the things. They may know many of the things but they should come away feeling that they also learned some things.

Okay, that's part A. Part B is that's not my essential audience. So you have to sustain these two seemingly contradictory thoughts, right? My essential audience is a trade book readership, right? I'm writing for a general audience, right? That's what I do. I don't write for academic presses or in an academic format or genre. And so I don't actually when I sit down to write a book, my first audience is me. I'm writing to satisfy my own curiosity. I want to what can I understand about this topic? That's really paramount to me. But if I have to speak in publisher speak, I'm writing for a general audience, right? So I have to do these two things.

I have to write in a way that will hopefully introduce a lot of people to a topic that they either don't know anything about or just know enough about to be curious and not to bore them to bring them along in a way that will make them hopefully not just buy the book or read it. And I also aim to make historians say that guy French like I started out thinking maybe what's this like huh? And I came away thinking actually he said some pretty interesting things that I hadn't seen put that way before. We both work at Columbia. You can let me know later if I succeeded.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 52:46

They work in the same school. So they're going to they're going to continue this much later sort of here. Um

HOWARD W. FRENCH 52:50

I won't I won't be offended if everything about this. More power to you. But I don't think most people do in your field.

52:57

Audience questions: China and Africa

HOWARD W. FRENCH 52:58

The [Unclear: lady in blue]

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 53:00

I think has a hand first.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2 53:03

I wanted to ask a question about your previous work and as far as I'm aware, your two books are the most prominent works related to the topic of China Africa. And

HOWARD W. FRENCH 53:18

The topic of what? Sorry, I'm

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2 53:20

China and Africa. China Africa. And I just wanted to ask you a general question about your assessment of that field, that area of discourse. What do you think about the current landscape and what are your hopes for the discourse of China and Africa?

HOWARD W. FRENCH 53:35

Okay, that's a another rich question. So the many of you may not be familiar with this part of my work, but I wrote it's actually one book that's exclusively about China and Africa called China's Second Continent and it's also there. I wrote that book for a particular reason that relates to your question directly to your question. I had long experience in Africa already by the time I wrote the book and I was li had was had just spent six years living in China as I began that project. Spoke Chinese fluently and was became aware of the beginnings of a discourse about chi in at that time almost exclusively in the quote unquote western press about this what was being portrayed as a budding relationship between China and Africa.

And it was my assessment at the time and this remains largely the case still today that most of the people who are writing about this fell in one of three buckets. Bucket one there westerners who know something about Africa but not much about China. Or there are Westerners who know something about China but not much about Africa. Or there are westerners who don't know much about either one of them but they just want to write a book right and I said I have an opportunity here to do something different I have a lot of experience in both of these places I have the linguistic background necessary I can actually go talk to people in their own languages in their own environments and try to assess things for myself and that's what it was this is really the last book of journalism pure journalism that I did it's not a book of analysis or theory.

It's not really a book of history either. It's a book of reportage. I traveled through the continent for I think cumulatively about 15 months really low to the ground talking with Africans and talking with Chinese people about their relationships and I presented the works presented that way. So to your latter part of your question, what do I what is how do I assess things now? I think that the whole China Africa thing took off with remarkable speed in the beginning and had a great deal of momentum and different people felt differently about this. You know a lot of Westerners were panicked. China's taking over quote unquote Africa. In the beginning my early sense was certainly at the state level many African countries were exuberant because the west had so poorly served Africa for so long and at the end of the cold war had basically essentially turned its back entirely to Africa.

So here's a big new partner who's coming to do things here. So governments in Africa tended to be very excited. African peoples at the sort of popular level had much more complicated feelings about this. I'm not really actively working on this topic now, but the trend I still watch the read watch the subject. I still spend a lot of time in Africa. I also traveled still to China. I think things have plateaued. I don't mean to say China has dropped its interest in Africa or is going away so to speak. I just think that after an initial period of very rapid strong takeoff when China was making huge investments all the time and the landscape in many African countries was being transformed by big projects that things

have kind of they've reached an equilibrium and I expect this to be these partnerships to be important in the future but not as dramatic in terms of the sort of roll out of new developments constantly that we saw in the first 15 years or so.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 57:56

Thank you. Let's go to this side. Sorry, I'll be back to you. There's someone here with his hand up.

58:06

Audience questions: neocolonialism

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3 58:06

Thank you. I first wanted to

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 58:08

Your name please.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3 58:09

Oh my name is Nilah Amhos Bayan Watanubian. Thank you. Short version is Nubian. I want to thank you for both your works and your continued work to bring to the public to the general public not just academic only issues that we need to not only learn about but also discuss. I am presently consumed by writing something about one of the areas that Nkrumah really talked to us about which was neocolonialism and my work deals with the title neocolonialism in black meaning that we're facing an increasing amount of neocolonialist type behavior and effects from people that I call BONAs B O N A meaning that they're black, they're opportunists, they are neocolonialists and they're accommodationists. So BA and that pro that process had led me to look at a variety of things within our experiences as Africans throughout the world, not just at home.

And for me, home is Africa and abroad is outside of Africa. And so looking at those things, I wanted to get your perspective on how you perceive what I call BONAs both at home and abroad impacting not only our relationship in terms of the so-called African-American and African discourse with how we are being attacked in other ways but supported by the BONAs. And that to me is really about our ability to exist as sovereign states and as sovereign people anywhere in the world where we are oppressed both racially, economically and sexually. So how do you think that the BONA behavior is not only exacerbating or aiding our separation, our confusion and our id idolizing our own enemies so to speak.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 1:00:38

Thank you. I'm not this is a this is a new term for me. I'm going to address the question. I appreciate your definition of BONA. I think confusion is an important word. You said separation. I spoke to this before. You know, this African versus African-American thing is about confusion and separation. I think in terms of neocolonialism and accommodationism I think I don't have much to say about the manifestations of neocolonialism by people of African descent outside of Africa. But people of African

descent in Africa, in other words, Africans are very often ardent neocolonialists, right? Actually I'm writing something about francophone Africa right now. And if you look at francophone Africa, it's in a period of turmoil right now, particularly with regard to the Sahel countries.

But I said the struggle that Nkrumah had highlighted in the beginning and a struggle that Africa has never overcome is about how to enter into a satisfying form of modernity on its own terms. Right? And much of Africa still is in the grips of neocolonial governance that you have elites that are rewarded by foreign powers for antinational behavior. And this is not unique to the francophone countries. I have a p another separate I have another piece coming out in another venue about the new book by Mahmood Mamdani about Idi Amin and Yoweri Museveni but so Museveni is an example of a non-francophone leader who has basically earned his keep by satisfying the global terrorism and national security agenda of western countries while utterly dominating his own country in personalized terms.

And the latest news is that basically his son is lined up to be his successor. He's 80 years old Museveni took power in 1986, right? And so if you look at Ivory Coast, if you look at Senegal until very recently, if you look at Cameroon, if you look at any number of francophone countries and then a certain number of African non-francophone countries, you find a large number of these characters who perpetuate themselves in power by servicing the agenda of distant western countries. And so that's neocolonialism right there.

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 1:03:39
Thank you. Yes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 4 1:03:40
Yes. I had a question and also just sharing information. I'm wondering if either of you are aware that Ayi Kwei Armah has just published an ebook on Nkrumah and if you've if about it. I don't know the title but I understand that it was published this year as an ebook.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 1:04:03
I have heard something to that effect. I have not read seen or read the book yet. I'm interested to do so.

1:04:15

Sankara and the open road

HOWARD W. FRENCH 1:04:15
Yeah.

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 1:04:15
I have one more question before I throw it back. I realized there was this quote in your book I wanted to ask you about. I think it was at the end which is quite optimistic for having gone through all of that period of life. You ended up with this. In a world that has insight no obvious quick solutions for Africa.

Maybe it all comes down to this. Starting with a can do vision and figuring out how to connect people across a multitude of frontiers and ethnicity, religion, colonial languages and borders while never losing sight of the needs of the ordinary people. Let's hope for more of these in an altogether future. Perfect, optimism, optimistic and all, but I realize you're using it as a coda to a story that has done everything you've said here, but still didn't work.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 1:04:58

What you didn't say Kọ́lá is I'm speaking about I'm attributing this vision to a particular figure

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 1:05:06

To Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso right

HOWARD W. FRENCH 1:05:10

Who is a man I knew personally and saw his I was a journalist in Burkina Faso when he first came to power and because his style of rule was so open and simple that I was able to have conversations with him I'm attributing this way of understanding standing governance in Africa. I'm attributing that to him and I'm saying, Thomas Sankara clearly came to a an a bad end. He was killed by neocolonialists. Yeah. But his example, which is recent still, tells us that there are other possibilities for Africa. Yeah. And so I don't I really the word optimistic makes me cringe a little bit but I think Africans need to understand

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 1:06:01

No I'm not against the ideas but having read the book one comes to the conclusion that you do this way which Nkrumah did there are still big structural problems you have to deal with in spite of how perfect or good you try to be.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 1:06:22

Sure. You know, I think in fact that African

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 1:06:25

This is my cynic self.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 1:06:27

That's okay. I think in fact Africa has a more of an politically speaking, not economically speaking, but at least politically speaking, Africa has more of an open road in front of it today than it did Nkrumah's time. Nkrumah's time was the height of the cold war and the superpowers were vying ardently to consign the world to one camp or another, right? That's there's not that much of that happening anymore, right? We have a many other problems. I'm not going to I almost began to go into some of them, but I' I'd like to stay out of that for the time being. Waking up is grim enough sometimes, right? But one of the main problems for Africa right now is not foreign countries, foreign powers explicitly telling them do this, do that, do this, do that.

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Right? So it's a time when African political leadership should rise to the occasion I think and look to the past for inspiration and Sankara I think is a source of inspiration. I think Nkrumah elements of Nkrumah's history are sources of in inspiration. And just to cite those two, they are not alone.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 1:07:51

Thank you. Were you going to ask a question? Yes. There's a gentleman in front please.

1:07:58

Audience questions: Pan-Africanism across regions

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 1:07:58

Oh, you go ahead.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 5 1:07:59

Sorry, I have the microphone. The mic. Hi, my name is Tommy Banjo. I'm a doctoral candidate in at New York University. And I think just leading off this point where you said about political leadership. I'd love to know, Professor French, in your research. What was you talked about in relationship with other West African leaders? What was Nkrumah's relationship with, let's say, East African and South African Pan-Africanists? Just mainly because I'm really interested to see whether or not you could say there's different types of inflections of Pan-Africanism based off of different regions in which they manifest because I think it's very clear most of the discourse is often oriented around West African leaders as they kind of develop the Pan-African movement and I would just be interested to see like oh what more distinctions can we make between different versions of Pan-Africanism that do share same overall vision however if the regional background or historical context in the different regionals made them manifest in different ways.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 1:08:57

Okay, thank you. The sound was muddled on some of that, but I think I get the basic gist. Nkrumah, what impressed me the most about Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism was that it was not blah. It was not just hot air, right? Sorry, he believed it. He believed it. He lived it and he put his money behind it or his country's money behind it, right? So when Guinea becomes independent under very rough circumstances in 1958, Sékou Touré refuses to be enter into a neocolonial relationship with France. The French literally ripped out all of the wiring of the country, destroyed the archives, pulled out their teachers and doctors from overnight from the country Nkrumah floated with Ghana's resources. Sékou Touré's early government.

Okay, example one. Number two Nkrumah creates under the with the help and guidance of George Padmore who's a tremendously interesting figure in his own right a bureau of African affairs Nkrumah sets up a continental radio shortwave radio station which beams essentially liberationary liberationist information into other African countries in a variety of language. It's like the voice of America, but it's the voice of Ghana, right? This is bold stuff. Nkrumah begins to host through the Bureau of African

Affairs sort of rising activists and revolutionary leaders from a whole variety of African countries. Give them ideological training in a few cases. Give the military training in Ghana in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This is real stuff.

Patrice Lumumba, whose role in, Nkrumah's political life is actually in a kind of accidental way really becomes very important. Patrice Lumumba shows up in Ghana in 1958 as a person who was in no hurry to have independence at all. He said whenever it comes, it's, we can't, first of all, we can't have the unwashed public. That was not his phrase, but the people who haven't been to school don't need to vote. Let's just have, the responsible elites be part of the polity in Congo, at least at first. Right. Lumumba comes to Ghana to the this all African people conference in 1958 and hears speeches from Nkrumah and from Frantz Fanon and a variety of other people and gets the fire right away and goes back to most people don't know this about Lumumba that this is where it starts for him and goes back to Congo and right away puts himself on a track toward or puts his country on a track toward independence right Robert Mugabe was supported by Nkrumah.

Robert Mugabee's wife was a Ghanaian. One could go on and on. The revolutionary struggle in Guinea-Bissau arose out of support or got its grounding from support from Nkrumah. So Nkrumah was not just it was not just an idea. It was not just like a goal. It was something that in fact it caused troubles for Nkrumah domestically. Some Ghanaians used this against him and said why are you wasting the resources of our country. We have needs here in Ghana. This is a foolish extravagance. We can't afford to do this. Why? This is just a vanity project for you, Nkrumah. Right. But no, he actually believed in this and trained his resources toward that purpose.

1:13:01

Audience questions: returning to Africa

HOWARD W. FRENCH 1:13:06

Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 6 1:13:08

Hi, Professor French. My name is Zadique Gardner Perry and I had a question. It could be said that Pan-Africanism is reemerging and there is a new goal of migrating back to Africa among African-Americans. And this time there's no like leader but there is social media which is closing that gap and closing the distance between our worlds. Do you believe that this time especially in a political climate that we're currently in the idea of a growing Pan-Africanism migration back to the continent could be sustained in a real way? And as someone who's like lived and worked extensively in Africa and have is from the US, do you think that there is a path that could be that's a formidable one for African-Americans as Nkrumah initially thought and believed for us?

HOWARD W. FRENCH 1:14:17

Thank you for your question. This the short answer is yes. I gave a short answer. There's short I believe in all of that. Yes. The somewhat longer answer is that this takes work. And it's going to take work by all involved. It takes work here in the United States to build more of an understanding and sense of in an informed sense of Africa. And it takes work if it's going to really happen at any scale that's important on the part of African countries that are willing to encourage this thing to encourage it practically speaking, right? And so the biggest form of practical encouragement that I've seen recently has not been in Ghana, which has flirted with this back to Africa idea.

There are a lot of Americans in Ghana, black Americans in Ghana. The Ghanaian government has kind of flirted with this notion of return and we'll give you Ghanaian citizenship and things like this. I can tell you from personal experience, it's not that simple, right? Benin by sharp contrast just last year passed a law which is now in effect and I know of cases of it having been implemented. If you can show by your birth certificate or census records or any other public document that you are a member of the African diaspora, it doesn't matter even if it's five, eight generations ago, you can have automatic citizenship to Okay, so that's work, right? This needs work.

This requires work. I hope that a book like this will help inspire people a to do the thing that you're talking about which is exploring ways to reconnect with Africa eventually move back to Africa so to speak. I also hope that it will be exert some sort of influence on the other side of the ocean in the direction of Benin. But it to be real it has to be more than just a dream right it has to be practical right and so Ghana unfortunately is a little shy of making it practical I don't I haven't heard anything from Nigeria do anything about this

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 1:16:46

I have no idea I was going to say that African countries have a lot to do as well I you can speak to what is happening on this side but I'm not encouraged by many of the things I see on the other Yeah.

HOWARD W. FRENCH 1:16:58

So, Benin has done a fantastic job on this subject. And if you, there's a French language barrier. It's a French-speaking country, but Benin is a well-ordered country with good systems, decent infrastructure, and for its own sake, just in terms of the history and culture of Benin, an incredibly interesting place to go. I would encourage people who are who would like to know more about the possibilities to think of Benin.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 1:17:28

Thank you very much. We have run to the end of the conversation and I thank you everyone for participating and thank you professor French for fielding all my questions and answering them with depth and grace. Thank you very much. Appreciate it. Thank you. Please buy the book. He will be here to sign them for you before he leaves. And I hope he'll sign mine before he leaves the stage. Thank you. I'll see you around.

ABOUT THIS TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was prepared by NYBALF from the automatic captions of the published recording, corrected for names and evident mishearings, and lightly edited for readability. It has not been checked line by line against the audio; the recording remains the authoritative record. Section headings are editorial. Timestamps refer to the recording on YouTube.

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Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún is a Nigerian poet, linguist, translator, filmmaker and publisher. His poetry collections are Edwardsville by Heart (2018), Ìgbà Èwe (2021) and Èṣù at the Library & Other Poems (2024). He founded the YorubaName.com dictionary project and publishes OlongoAfrica. He serves on the NYBALF board.

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