

KWAME NKRUMAH MEMORIAL PARK

In central Accra, in the same stately quarter as the grandiose and always empty Independence Square, past the road to Osu Castle where the president lives, and opposite the new national stadium, you should turn towards the Atlantic off 28th February Road before it becomes High Street and the city centre's *de facto* main car park. There is a green garden with some strange shapes in it.

Outside top Accra hotels a tranquil, maintained green space with flowering palms, firs and mahogany is a big deal. The Ghanaian capital is aggressively welcoming, and chock-full of mothers and children, animals, footballers, boxers, businessmen, preachers, and taxis and minivans full of them all. Even the cemeteries are full of dancing, singing mourners or folks sleeping off work or malaria. Here, though, birds swoop and wheel on the winds coming off the unseen ocean. Senegal coucals and pied crows. Somewhere in the trees there are peacocks – you can hear them. This garden, empty of people in the late afternoon, must be somewhere special.



Rather than bowl straight in, I shout “Hello! How are you?” to wake up the big woman in the small ticket hut. These encounters are usually fun. We compare the books we are reading. Mine an existentialist novella about a crime of passion, hers a get-rich-quick-through-prayer manual published by a pastor in Richmond, Virginia. We enjoy acting nonplussed at one another until eventually she sells me a ticket and photo-pass for the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park.

At midnight on 6th March 1957, Kwame Nkrumah announced Ghana's independence from colonial power, the first state in Africa to do so, and also created the country's first public park. He chose the Old Polo Club in Accra, previously capital of the Gold Coast, to make his declaration that Ghana would ‘manage its own affairs’. The club had been the preserve of British colonials and closed to black people. The choice of location could not have had more resonance. My guide for the next hour or so was the museum's manager, Stephen, whose commentary was nothing

if not rigorous. He immediately challenged my capacity for the interesting facts that he would share until he felt assured that I could take it all in. ‘I can tell your brain is not a paw-paw’ he said.

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In 1972 the young Ghanaian architect Don Arthur was in London, having travelled from Moscow where he was pursuing his doctorate degree. Nkrumah, in exile since a coup in 1966, died in hospital in Bucharest, Romania where he was receiving cancer treatment. His body was then buried in Guinea where, in sympathy for the Pan-Africanism he espoused, he had been appointed co-president. Meanwhile, in London, African students gathered to mourn. Many of them had been educated abroad as a direct result of Nkrumah's education reforms. Together, the African Students Union in London, amongst them Don Arthur, wrote and sent a memo to Guinea asking that the body of the late president be brought to Ghana at such time that the military

opposite: Kwame Nkrumah bronze statue
below: Stephen



government would denounce the coup. Thus the project for the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park was born, but it would be twenty years (1992) and two more coups before President Jerry Rawlings decided to commit to honouring the country's first leader with a permanent memorial. Nkrumah's coffin was exhumed (it had since been moved from Guinea to his hometown in rural Ghana) and Don Arthur, himself now a Minister was appointed as lead architect and landscape designer.

Arthur re-read Nkrumah's autobiography and focussed on four key facts: Nkrumah admired Gandhi and his non-violent philosophy; he was inspired by the French Revolution; and by the October Revolution in Russia; as an African he took pride in Egyptian civilisation, going so far as to marry an Egyptian, Fathia. Arthur then looked to prominent architecture in these diverse cultures and realised that with the exception of the Great Wall of China they contained the ‘seven wonders of the world’. He developed design principles based on the Taj Mahal in India,

the Eiffel Tower in France, the Pyramids of Egypt, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Alexander Tower and the Mausoleum for Lenin in Moscow. As events in his lifetime and surrounding his death had proved, Nkrumah, in the minds of his adherents at least, was a global figure deserving of a globally significant monument. The challenge was how to express this sense of monument in an architectural vocabulary that was fundamentally African.

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On entering the park from the main gate, two reflective pools (a concept lifted from the Taj) lead you to a bronze statue of Nkrumah. These pools are fed by 2 rows of statues of kneeling pipers. These fountains were never actually on during any of the three visits I made researching this article: ‘Cutbacks’ said Stephen. ‘Broken’ said the ticket woman. Because the sound of the (hypothetical) water is carried by the south-west trade winds coming off the Atlantic, at the point at which you pass the last fountain the sound supposedly recedes and you are left in silence,



opposite, top: Kwame and Fathia Nkrumah Mausoleum
bottom: Kwame Nkrumah Museum

right: 'Dr Kwame Nkrumah tabling the motion of destiny for independence at the Legislative Assembly (1953)'



intimate with Nkrumah's statue in bronze. Some Ghanaians claim that he was so progressive in outlook that he lived 100 years ahead of his time. The distance from the main gate in to the grounds to Nkrumah's statue, which is sited on the exact point that he made the announcement of independence, is measured at a hundred steps.

Moving beyond the statue, the strangest shape of all is a truncated swoop in grey marble that reaches up about five storeys. This is the mausoleum and its design, like everything here, is significant. It is designed to evoke a tree stump. The tree has roots and needs water. These are important and perennial concepts in Africa. The trunk is solid but the branches have been chopped down in their prime. Nkrumah's project was unfulfilled, cut short by the coup d'etat in 1966.

One passes through the mausoleum, finished in kitsch Italian marble, containing the caskets of Nkrumah and Fathia, Nkrumah's beloved wife. She was buried here just last year. 'Chop. Chop. Chop' Says Stephen ('Eat. Eat. Eat'). 'What can be said? Our women love to chop and they grow fat. Alas she died'. Beyond, across a dainty drawbridge, the museum itself is a semi-subterranean single-storey room, faced with a stunning white Modernist-Egyptian frieze dedicated to Fathia. The frieze, my favourite thing in the whole park, has a weird, timeless quality as it appears Soviet on first glance, but depicts traditional Ashanti symbols such as 'Sanko Fa' (returning to one's roots) and circumspection (an elderly woman holding an egg representing the fragility of political power in a cleft stick), all in rigid hieroglyphic elevation.

Inside the museum is a limited but stunning collection of black and white photos. They have the allure of snaps kept in a tin at the in-laws', brought out to reminisce on family occasions. But these photos show Nkrumah with the pantheon of post-war political icons: standing stern-faced in a VW convertible on his release from Fort James prison in 1951; resplendent centre-frame in a white suit tabling the motion for independence in 1953; in the back of Kennedy's limousine; at the UN with Krushchev; in tuxedo, quick-stepping with Queen Elizabeth; on a sofa with Fidel Castro; in three-piece tweed with Harold MacMillan; in Mao's garden in traditional kente cloth; on the tarmac at Addis Ababa

airport with the tiny, doll-like Selassie; sharing a joke with Nasser, who handpicked Fathia as Nkrumah's wife.

However, Nkrumah is not one of those icons himself. I didn't learn about him at secondary school. He wasn't assassinated or killed in battle. He succumbed to prostate cancer in exile in 1972. However, he would hands down win the best supporting actor Oscar for post-war leaders. Nkrumah was the engine in developing a Pan-African consciousness and forging links between the developing world and the soviet bloc. I cannot think of any one other figure of the cold-war, post-colonial moment who achieved dialogue with such a range of world leaders. His moment in the sun, when highlife music set the tempo for an ambitious programme of public works and nation-building, couldn't last. Ghana stoutly refused to capitulate to the neo-colonial pressure of the US – he steered the country towards communism. This led to a populist coup in 1966 and Nkrumah's flight to Guinea.

These days, a year on from the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of independence, there is in Ghana a warm nostalgia for Nkrumah, and I feel, having visited the museum, that he represents a lost era when politicians were creating a global consciousness based on alternative ideas and values and debate – things that technology now somehow flattens and stands in for. But what does the place mean for Ghanaians? Stephen tells me 'this country's reliance on aid and tourism is not what Nkrumah would have wanted. He wanted self-reliance for this country. He should be resting here after his hard life, but I think that he is not'. I'm sure that Stephen, an active member of the opposition NDC, is only half-joking when he says 'When I am President I will continue Nkrumah's work – so that the branches can grow to their highest height'. ≈