

Collective memory, merging enemies, consistency of word and place: Nkrumah's rhetorical artefacts in the "Positive Action" protest

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Introduction

The 1950 riots in the Gold Coast which prefaced the first general elections under the British Colonial Government were called forth by a plethora of rhetorical performances of Kwame Nkrumah. On the 8th of January, 1950, Kwame Nkrumah, the Leader of the CPP, declared 'Positive Action' in the Gold Coast. After the aftermath of the 28th February 1948 riots which shook the colony, the Watson Commission¹ was set up by the Colonial Government to examine the causes of the nationwide unrest. Amongst its proposals, the Commission indicated the need for a constitutional review of the present Gold Coast constitution. In response to the latter proposal, the Coussey Commission was set up in December 1948 to review the constitution accordingly². When it finally published its report in October 1949, it indicated an increase in African (referring to black Gold Coasters) representation in colonial governance but did not indicate a time frame for the independence of the Gold Coast.

On the 20th of November 1949, being disconsolate with the silence of the Coussey Commission's report on the country's independence date, Nkrumah organised a meeting of Gold Coast People's Representatives Assembly to put forward an arrangement of a Constituent Assembly in order to demand self-government³. On the 15th of December 1949, Nkrumah made three significant rhetorical moves, which were suggestive of his unrelenting decision to press on with his intention for a civil protest within the Gold Coast. First, he wrote a letter to the Governor expressing the CPP's intentions of calling for a nationwide protest if the CPP's

¹The four-member committee, chaired by Mr. Aiken Watson, K.C., started its work in April 1948 and submitted its report to the Gold Coast Colonial Government in June 1948. See K. Nkrumah, *The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1957): 84-85.

²See D. Rooney, *Kwame Nkrumah: Vision and tragedy*. (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2007).

³*Ibid.* 81.

recommendations for immediate self-government were declined by the Colonial Government⁴. Secondly, on this same day, even before the Colonial Government could respond, Nkrumah personally wrote an editorial of the CPP's newspaper, *The Evening News*, with a title "the Era of Positive Action Draws Nigh." In this editorial, Nkrumah inveighed, "too long have we left the destiny of our country to be toyed with. We shall no longer wait for freedom to 'come' to us, we shall march forward to demand our right ourselves."⁵With respect to the third move, the CPP held a rally at the West End Arena in Accra where Nkrumah explicated 'Positive Action' to the masses⁶.

At this rally, he sought to indicate the failure of all the key institutions in advancing the freedom of the Gold Coast. He noted:

Get ready, people of the Gold Coast ... The Coussey Committee has failed to grant the people of this country full self-government for the country; the Legislative Council has failed to demand self-government for the country; the Chief's Territorial Councils have failed to demand self-government for the country; and the British Government has tactfully refused to grant the country its true and legitimate demand for self-government. The people of the Gold Coast now emphatically refuse to remain any longer under Colonial status; they demand Dominion Status Now.⁷

Nkrumah ended the 15th December rally with a two-week ultimatum, demanding the setting up of a Constituent Assembly within the territory.⁸ These rapid and consistent rhetorical performances increased the momentum and altered the mood for protest in Accra, thereby, heightening the moral pressure for freedom on the Colonial Government. True to its posture, the government failed to respond positively to Nkrumah's demands for self-government but rather decided to enter into negotiation with Nkrumah after the New Year of 1950.⁹ However, on 8th of December 1950, before a mass gathering of CPP supporters at the West End Arena in Accra, Nkrumah declared 'Positive Action' in the entire colony, the Gold Coast.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵See speech in B. Timothy, *Kwame Nkrumah: His Rise to Power* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963): 86.

⁶Rooney, *Kwame Nkrumah*, 81.

⁷Timothy, *Kwame Nkrumah*, 87.

⁸*Ibid.* 87.

⁹*Ibid.* 88.

My purpose in this paper is to consider a number of issues. First, I argue that Nkrumah purposefully employed the collective memory of his audience to establish the foundation of his argumentation in his address. Further, I examine Nkrumah's strategy in merging two different "enemies" into a single element of "opposition" to the independence of the Gold Coast. Secondly, I will explore the Speech's strategy of blame and accusation on one side as against praise and defence on the other side. I will conclude by looking at Nkrumah's rhetorical consistency in his use of words and place within this key protest address.

Since Nkrumah's address on 8th January 1950 is premised on both his declamation at the West End Arena and his article three weeks earlier on the 15th December 1949, they inform very much the rhetorical effect of the 8th January address. In fact, I intend to present my analysis of 8th January speech as a final sequel to the subject of 'Positive Action' which received rhetorical force as a result of the two activities (Accra Evening News article and speech) which occurred on 15th December 1949.

Merging the enemies

One of the key strategies of Nkrumah in this address was his reliance on the collective memory of his audience in order to effect what Gregg refers to as "rhetorical transaction."¹⁰ Palmer-Mehta notes that "collective memory is a rhetorical, cultural process arbitrarily connected to official historical discourses (which are themselves arbitrarily constructed) and personal memories, and utilized by rhetors and audiences to mutually constitute a public for particular purposes."¹¹ For the speaker's successful application of his audience sense of collective memory, we can agree with Perelman who argues that the good speaker is the one who is "animated by the very mind of his audience."¹² That is, through the application of collective memory, Nkrumah sought to make the audience appreciate the

¹⁰Gregg defines "rhetorical transaction" as "a situation wherein a speaker undertakes to produce a message for the purpose of affecting the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of a listener or group of listeners ... the end goals of such discourse are seen as pragmatic in some sense, and the speaker is successful insofar as he can maneuver his listener to assent to the point of view, claims, or actions proposed by the speaker" (72). See R. B. Gregg, "The Ego-Function of the Rhetoric of Protest", in *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 4, 2(1971): 72.

¹¹See definition of collective memory in Valerie Palmer-Mehta, "Aung San Suu Kyi and the Rhetoric of Social Protest in Burma," in *Women's Studies in Communication*, 32, 2 (2009): 157.

¹²In reference to 'audience,' I rely on Perelman's view of the audience: that it is not the people whom the rhetor addresses directly (in this case the CPP members) but also the colonial administration. See C. Perelman, *The Realm of Rhetoric*, W. Klubark, trans. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982): 14.

efficacy of civil protest which served to build the ego of the masses for future action. Gregg further argues that “as the result of attacking enemies, protestors appear to experience and express feelings of ego-enhancement, ego-affirmation, and even ego-superiority.”¹³ This is affirmed in Nkrumah’s rhetoric. He noted:

Nothing strikes so much terror into the hearts of the Imperialists and their agents than the term Positive Action. This is especially so because of their fear of the masses responding to the call to apply this final form of resistance in case the British Government failed to grant us our freedom consequent on the publication of the Coussey Committee Report.

Nkrumah indirectly reminded the audience of the effects of the 28th February 1948 riots on the British colonial administration which necessitated the present constitutional review which had been presented by the Coussey Committee. The 28th February riots were carried out by the masses all over the Gold Coast and it shook the colonial administration to the extent that the then Governor, Sir Gerald Creasy, who had only been at post for less than two years, had to be immediately replaced by Whitehall with Sir Charles Arden-Clarke as a result of Governor Creasy’s inability to manage the nationwide riots within the colony.

The effect of the 28th February civil protest on the colonial administration was undeniable. During the riots, mobs attacked shops and office belonging to the United African Company (UAC). In addition, European and Syrian traders all over the Gold Coast were also not spared of the loot.¹⁴ This situation certainly disrupted economic activities and interest of the Colonial Government. The masses became the heroes and martyrs of the riots. Nkrumah strategically avoided referring to the benefits of the commotion of the 28th February civil unrest since it may have been suggestive of his call for a violent protest which he directly wanted to avoid. However, reminding his audience of that collective memory – the success of the February riots – was key to his present call for action. He therefore alluded to it in the 15th December editorial of the Accra Evening News. He cried out:

Shall the blood of our beloved brethren who were shot at the Christiansborg Crossroads in February last year be shared in vain?
These are the questions that confront us today in our present

¹³Gregg, “*The Ego-Function of the Rhetoric of Protest*,” 84.

¹⁴Rooney, *Kwame Nkrumah*, 64.

struggle to free this nation from the grip of Colonial misrule and misgovernment.¹⁵

In effect, Nkrumah argued for a continuation of the effective sacrifices which had begun and had become a source of hope for the present protest which was the object of his present address. Thus, memory, according to Palmer-Mehta, "can be a powerful source of rhetorical invention."¹⁶ Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles in arguing in support of collective memory, indicate that "unlike individual memory, which is often only present in thought or confined to documents reserved for private consumption, collective memory is public; it is the publicity of collective memory that establishes its political/rhetorical power."¹⁷ Nkrumah, therefore, used collective memory of the previous civil protest to boost the ego of the audience as a means of soliciting for their full participation in the 8th January civil protest.

Nkrumah resorted to a move of association. By the process of association, Perelman posits that the speaker is able to bring together differing elements by ensuring consonance in them.¹⁸ Nkrumah tried to rhetorically merge the Colonial Government and the then opposition party, the UGCC, as a single force of resistance against self-rule, whilst on the other hand, he sought to build legitimacy for the CPP's protest movement by courting the support of the traditional authority within the Gold Coast. The former association becomes what Perelman regards as a negative association whereas the latter becomes a positive one. The prime purpose of this rhetorical act was to arouse the anger and the frustrations of the masses against the Colonial Government whilst at the same time ensuring a massive support for the nationwide civil disobedience. Nkrumah presented himself and the CPP as victims of the manipulative acts of the Colonial Government and the opposing UGCC. He inveighed:

The term Positive Action has been erroneously and maliciously publicised, no doubt by the Imperialists and their concealed agent-provocateurs and stooges. These political renegades, enemies of the Convention People's Party and for that matter Ghana's freedom, have diabolically publicised that the C.P.P.'s programme

¹⁵The version of the speech for this work is the published version Timothy's work. All. See Timothy, 88 – 92.

¹⁶See Palmer-Mehta, "Aung San Suu Kyi and the Rhetoric of Social Protest in Burma," 157.

¹⁷Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles "Collective Memory, Political Nostalgia, and the Rhetorical Presidency: Bill Clinton's Commemoration of the March on Washington, August 28, 1998," in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 86, 4(2000): 418.

¹⁸Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 190.

of positive action means riot, looting and disturbances, in a word, violence.

By these words, Nkrumah placed the Colonial Government and the U.G.C.C., which he indirectly referred to as “concealed agent-provocateurs,” as standing in opposition to the freedom which the C.P.P. was fighting for. In a sense, he presented the two groups as “enemies” before his audience.

In furtherance of the above rhetoric move, Nkrumah went ahead and presented a narrative of his meeting with the Ga Traditional Council, the authority which had traditional jurisdiction in Accra, the capital of the Gold Coast. This detailed narration was meant to provide first-hand information as to what took place at that important meeting. White argues that “narrating/storytelling is one of the most effective means of public speech.”¹⁹ The narrative which Nkrumah provided in the speech lends credence to the negative association of the opposition party and the Colonial Government. As a rhetorical strategy, the narration was employed by Nkrumah not only to disclose the sinister motives of the opposition against his course for freedom but also to get the audience to empathise with him as a victim of the opposition’s attack. Foss defines a narrative as a “way of ordering and presenting a view of the world through description of a situation involving characters, action, and settings.”²⁰

Defending and praising whilst accusing and blaming detractors

The term ‘Positive Action’ was an invocation of Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence. ‘Positive Action’, therefore, became the underlying principle during the Fifth Pan-African Congress held in Manchester in 1945. Nkrumah was personally inspired by Gandhi’s philosophy.²¹

The 1945 Manchester Conference was mostly attended by Africans, both in Europe and from mainland Africa. Most of the

¹⁹For the rhetorical function of narration see Shauntae Brown White, “Telling the Story: Kansas City Mayor and the United Methodist Pastor Emmanuel Cleaver’s Use of Storytelling to Transcend Rhetorical Barriers,” in *Journal of African American Studies*, 9, 4 (2006): 37.

²⁰See S. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* (2nd ed.), (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1996): 400.

²¹The Manchester Congress in 1945 was influenced by Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence. Read the proceedings of the conference in G.Padmore, (ed.). *Colonial and Coloured Unity: A Programme of Action; History of the Pan African Congress* (2nd ed.), (S.I.: Hammersmith Bookshop, 1963): 27-70. Aside the spirit of the 1945 Conference, Nkrumah had also been personally inspired by Gandhi. See Rooney, *Kwame Nkrumah*, 52.

participants at this conference later became part of the first generation freedom fighters in the emancipation of Africa from colonial rule. Nkrumah's call for a nonviolent protest brings to the fore the spirit of the Manchester meeting out of which the architecture of the African freedom liberation was drawn. As co-secretary with the Trinidadian George Padmore at this conference, Nkrumah enacted his authority and commitment to the values and core principle for African liberation. Calling for Positive Action, therefore, was not a personal call for civil disobedience but it was an obedient enactment of the anti-colonial mandate which had emerged from the deliberation of the 1945 Pan-African Conference. By so doing, Nkrumah brought to bear, five year later in 1950, the memory, authority and nostalgia of the conference on the current struggle in the Gold Coast.

Mahatma Gandhi, a man who successfully led India's struggle for independence, employed the principle of nonviolence throughout India's struggle for independence.²² Rhetorically, Nkrumah's invocation of Gandhi's philosophy was an indirect appeal to the Gandhi's authority. In this type of argument, the speaker "uses the acts or opinions of a person ... as a means of proof in support of a thesis."²³ Nkrumah, therefore, sought to rub unto himself the prestige of Gandhi and to situate the Gold Coast's struggle within a similar situation as India's. In other words, Nkrumah had perceived the parallels in the struggles of India and the Gold Coast since both countries were former colonies of Britain. Nkrumah sought to replicate Gandhi's success in India in the Gold Coast.

By and large, Nkrumah repeatedly indicated through the speech's rhetoric that in principle the country's quest for independence had been duly acknowledged nationwide. He said:

It is a comforting fact to observe that we have cleared the major obstacle to the realisation to our national goal in that ideologically the people of this country and their chiefs have accepted the idea of self-government even now.

This argument and direction of his rhetoric indirectly referred to the nationwide participation in the 28th February 1948 riots, a key protest movement that shook the foundations of the Gold Coast Colonial Government. The speech goes ahead to argue for "strategy and the intensity and earnestness of our demand." Nkrumah, therefore, called for

²²For details of Gandhi's moral philosophy of non-violence, see M. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance – Satyagraha*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1961): 1-400.

²³See Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 305.

a consistent application of the strategy of nonviolence which is expressed in 'Positive Action.' The legitimacy for 'Positive Action' which the speech argues for is not only expressed on behalf of the native and traditional authority but it is further extended to the British Colonial Government as well. Nkrumah argued:

The British Government and the people of Britain, with the exception of die-hard Imperialists, acknowledge the legitimacy of our demand for Self-government. However, it is and must be by our own exertion and pressure that the British Government can relinquish its authority and hand over the control of affairs, that is the Government, to the people of this country and their Chiefs.

In a sense, he argued that the quest for the freedom of the people of the Gold Coast was a universal fact which, strangely enough, is acknowledged and shared by both the colonized and the colonizer. However, this acknowledgement by the colonizer could only materialise into reality through the pursuit of civil disobedience action, which Nkrumah called 'Positive Action.' Nkrumah now only needed a coordinated and a consistent strategy and that was what he called the people of the Gold Coast to adopt. Knowing that the Colonial Government could employ different strategies to brake the front of the masses for 'Positive Action,' Nkrumah used the speech to establish several rhetoric layers of legitimacy for his call for civil disobedience as a means of further strengthening the support of the people of the Gold Coast. He went ahead to wrap his argument in a moral rhetoric to establish a deeper justification. But as Nkrumah pursued this moral rhetoric of justification, he tried to indirectly display his practical wisdom in the course which he was calling the whole nation to join him to pursue. He explained:

There are two ways to achieve Self-government: either by armed revolution and violent overthrow of the existing regime, or by constitutional and legitimate non-violent methods. In other words: either by armed might or by moral pressure. For instance, Britain prevented the two German attempts to enslave her by armed might, while India liquidated British Imperialism there by moral pressure. We believe that we can achieve Self-government even now by constitutional means without resort to any violence.

There is no doubt that Nkrumah's immediate audience comprised Second World War veterans who had largely led the 1948 riots. This is probable because Nkrumah and J.B. Danquah had addressed the war

veterans shortly before these ex-servicemen embarked on the landmark riots. The veterans after the two World Wars had come back home feeling despondent and disillusioned with the colonial situation back home in the Gold Coast. Three World War veterans were shot dead during the protest of veterans on 28th February 1948 on their way to present a petition to the Governor. This was upon the order of Superintendent Colin Imray, a British Colonial police officer. The anger, which was sparked among these veterans, escalated the fire of nationalism within the Gold Coast, thereby propelling the veterans to naturally support any movement that was working to seek the freedom of the Gold Coast. Naturally, they were, therefore, ready to support 'Positive Action.'

The speech's perfect rhetorical example from the World Wars was appropriate as Nkrumah sought the judgment and assent of the veterans who formed a key constituency for the success of his call for civil disobedience. The rhetorical effectiveness of Nkrumah's call for 'Positive Action' was heightened by the fact that these veterans had returned from a war which had only ended half a decade ago in the year 1945, knowing very well that the memories of the War was still fresh not only in the minds of the 63,000 ex-servicemen who had fought mostly in the Middle East and Burma²⁴ but also for the numerous black families who had in one way or the other lost a relation in the military campaign which had nothing to do with their own freedom back home in the Gold Coast.

In citing the examples of British and the Indians, Nkrumah makes some key rhetorical moves. Nkrumah in a forensic move provided a defence for his choice of "moral pressure" as against an "armed revolution." Whilst the two methods work, placing them side by side presented the military choice as opposite to the "non-violent method," thereby making the military option appear to his audience as immoral. Therefore, whilst Nkrumah pursued freedom from a legitimate and moral standpoint, Britain, when its own freedom was under threat made a violent and a seemingly immoral choice. A violent choice whose consequence can in no measure be compared to the current choice being made by the people of the Gold Coast. The speech, therefore, in an ironical twist, provided a rhetorical mirror for the British Colonial Government to weigh its own past actions vis-à-vis the legitimate and the "moral" choice being made by a people in search for their own freedom. Nkrumah presented a firm defence for the choice of nonviolence and rather accused the Colonial Government of being a culprit of the violent acts which the government accused the CPP of having committed.

Nkrumah used the rhetorical example of India's success story as a

²⁴See D. Rooney for details.

means to praise the CPP's choice of nonviolence which he made as a legitimate strategy for the fight for independence. He used India's example to create "presence"²⁵ in the minds of the audience to show the hope of expected freedom. India, among the former British colonial territories, had become a unique example of a colony which pursued freedom non-violently and prevailed. The strong moral undertone which under laid the successful work of Gandhi is selected for praise and Nkrumah appropriated for himself and the people of the Gold Coast, the moral authority and conduct which he perceived as a "constitutional means." If the strategy of nonviolence is within the legitimate and constitutional rights of the people of the Gold Coast, then rhetorically, any call for the curtailment of "Positive Action" remained unconstitutional, illegitimate and immoral. The speech praises the course of nonviolence whilst blaming political elements and soliciting the wrath of the audience against them for calling for the annulment of 'Positive Action.'

Rhetorical consistency of words and place

Beyond the confines of militant and coercive strategies, Nkrumah's protest rhetoric cannot be complete without a look at Nkrumah's consistent rhetorical approach which led to the climax of the 8th January invention. Nkrumah's first use of 'Positive Action' occurred in June 1949, more than 6 months before it was actually called into being in January 1950. The use of temporal space provided him the opportunity to build a gradual momentum which ensured the masses' accepted the ultimate purpose of his call for a civil protest in the colony. The consistent protest rhetoric increased the confidence and willingness of the masses who were being summoned for participation in the protest. Simons argues that leaders of social movements are expected to be consistent and they "must nevertheless be prepared to renounce previously championed positions."²⁶ Thus, the consistent appeal for 'Positive Action' inundated the minds of the masses for the protest act; thus rendering Nkrumah's declaration of 'Positive Action' on 8th January as a mere performative act. He noted:

As already explained, Positive Action has already begun, by our political education, by our newspaper agitation and platform

²⁵According to Perelman, it is only when "presence" is created in the consciousness of an audience does one create the desired emotions. See detailed discussion of "presence" in Perelman, *The New Rhetoric*, 34-37.

²⁶See H. W. Simons "Requirements, Problems and Strategies: A theory of Persuasion for Social Movements," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 56, 1 (1970): 6.

speeches and also by the establishment of the Ghana schools and Colleges as well as the fearless and legitimate activities of the C.P.P.

The 8th January declaration rather began as a physical protest movement which served to continue, what can be termed as, a psychological movement which had been in operation long before the present declaration of 'Positive Action'. Nkrumah's consistent rhetorical invention marked the effective continuation if not the beginning of 'Positive Action.' Beyond the consistency in words and action, the success of Nkrumah's protest rhetoric was highly augmented by his consistent use of physical space. On the rhetoric of place in protest, Endres and Senda-Cook posit that "social protest is not just about what is said. It is often just as important where the event occurs because of the meanings places hold and the particular memories and feelings these places evoke for the attendees."²⁷ The West End Sports Arena in Accra became a physical place of colonial resistance and this was particularly evident during the series of public deliberations which took place up till the call for 'Positive Action' in the Gold Coast. Beginning from Nkrumah's initial explanation of the meaning of 'Positive Action,' the declaration for the final protest in January 1950, Nkrumah repeatedly engaged the masses with his protest rhetoric at the West End Arena, giving the audience a new rhetorical meaning and association of the place as a symbol of protest.

Endres and Senda-Cook (2011) further argue that "during a protest event, human bodies interact with the physical structures to change allowing it to take on significance that might otherwise remain unrealised" (p. 263). The large audiences which gathered at the West End on the different occasions to listen to Nkrumah symbolically became associated with the strength and might of the resistance against the Colonial Government. The consistent physical response of Nkrumah's audience to meet at the West End Arena, in a rhetorical sense, was not only a constant warning to the Colonial Government but also, they gave indication to the Colonial Government of what the final outcome of 'Positive Action' might be, if Nkrumah finally called it into being in the Gold Coast.

For the masses, Nkrumah's consistent engagement with them at that physical space as regards the state of affairs on the protest, allowed them to own the protest movement. The physical connection which they had associated with the West End was extended to the protest, making

²⁷See the relevance of place and rhetoric. D. Endres and S.Senda-Cook. "Location Matters: The Rhetoric of Place in Protest," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 97, 3 (2011): 268.

their own; they were also ready to ensure continuity and to effect the protest to its logical end. Since 'Positive Action' was an idea which was hatched out of a continuous deliberation at West End Arena, it was appropriate for the final call for the civil disobedience in January 1950 to be made at the symbolic ground for colonial protest in the Gold Coast.

The West End, as a place for protest rhetoric, provided a triangular semiotic connection between Nkrumah, his supporters and the Colonial Government which ultimately evoked different feelings toward the call for the civil protest. Nkrumah's repeated engagement with the masses at this physical place hallowed it as a place of protest in the Gold Coast. So on 8th January 1950, when he summoned the masses to the West End to declare 'Positive Action' at around 5 o'clock,²⁸ the masses responded accordingly because they could duly identify themselves with the place and purpose of the meeting. In other words, Nkrumah, the audience and the West End Arena had merged into a single symbolic rhetorical meaning, the protest against colonial domination in the Gold Coast.

²⁸Nkrumah, *The Autobiography*, 1957.