



Oeconomia

History, Methodology, Philosophy

15-2 | 2025

Markets and Democracy: Complementarities and Conflicts

Emmanuel K. Akyeampong, *Independent Africa: The First Generation of Nation Builders*

Domenico Cristofaro



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/oeconomia/18882>

DOI: 10.4000/15caw

ISSN: 2269-8450

Publisher

Association Oeconomia

Printed version

Date of publication: June 1, 2025

Number of pages: 319-323

ISSN: 2113-5207

Electronic reference

Domenico Cristofaro, "Emmanuel K. Akyeampong, *Independent Africa: The First Generation of Nation Builders*", *Oeconomia* [Online], 15-2 | 2025, Online since 01 June 2025, connection on 13 December 2025. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/oeconomia/18882> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/15caw>



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) may be subject to specific use terms.

Comptes rendus / *Reviews*

Emmanuel K. Akyeampong, *Independent Africa: The First Generation of Nation Builders*

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2023, 342 pages, 978-025306664-0

Domenico Cristofaro*

Independent Africa: The First Generation of Nation Builders by Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong is a richly detailed and thought-provoking study that explores the multifaceted process of state formation and the political, economic, and cultural imaginaries that shaped Africa's newly independent nations. Focusing on the economic policies pursued by Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Léopold Sédar Senghor in Senegal, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, and Sékou Touré in Guinea during the early years of independence, the book provides an in-depth examination of postcolonial governance through five chapters. Grounded in meticulous archival and bibliographic research, the volume demonstrates a high degree of analytical rigor and offers valuable insights for both scholarly audiences and general readers.

The book sets out to historicize the intertwined processes of nation-building, economic development, and international engagement. Akyeampong structures his analysis around three major themes. First is the aspiration to forge national unity in the face of ethnic and regional fragmentation—an essential precondition for launching comprehensive development strategies. Central to the ambitions of Africa's first postcolonial leaders was the idea of modernity and modernization as a framework for fighting poverty, ignorance, and disease. The second theme addresses the imperative of economic development as a pathway to becoming "developmental states" (4)—states capable not only of generating material prosperity but also of distributing "hope" to their citizens. Development, and the industrialization perceived as necessary to achieve it, emerges as a

*University of Bologna. domenico.cristofaro2@unibo.it

conceptual and political cornerstone of post-independence governance, diplomacy, and statecraft. The third theme explores African strategies of “worldmaking,” a concept that broadens the scope of international relations to include non-sovereign actors. Akyeampong presents these global engagements—at national, regional, continental, and international scales—as integral to, and indeed complementary with, efforts at internal development and nation-building.

The first chapter provides a comprehensive and updated overview of African states, economies, and societies, tracing their trajectories from the 19th century through the 2010s. While not strictly necessary for specialist readers or for advancing the book’s core arguments, this chapter serves as a valuable contextual foundation, particularly for non-specialists. It also situates the author’s intervention within broader historiographical debates.

Chapter 2 explores domestic nation-building processes through an analysis of how nationalist leaders negotiated religion, art, and broader cultural policies. Religion, described by the author as an “inescapable force” (70), posed a complex challenge for leaders who were personally devout yet committed to secular, socialist state models. The chapter also compares the differing approaches to chieftaincy across the case studies, emphasizing both the resilience and variable influence of this institution. Moreover, Akyeampong highlights the strategic creation of national symbols and cultural institutions—spaces of anticolonial and pan-African expression—as crucial tools for breaking with colonial legacies. The post-independence era, he argues, witnessed a flourishing of theater, music, poetry, and the visual arts, fostered by the ideological vision and material investment of the first generation of African independent leaders.

The third chapter is the analytical heart of the book. It examines the intellectual underpinnings of economic policymaking and the transnational circulation of economic ideas. At the center of this analysis is the emergence of “development economics,” a discipline that evolved out of colonial economic thought and was designed specifically for newly independent nations in Africa and Asia, particularly within American universities. The chapter contrasts Nkrumah’s and Houphouët-Boigny’s development strategies and focuses on the influence of W. Arthur Lewis—Nkrumah’s chief economic adviser from 1952 to 1957—on Ghana’s economic planning. Akyeampong convincingly argues that development economics carried a distinctly colonial imprint and was deeply embedded in Cold War geopolitics and U.S. interests. While

contrasting the Ghanaian and Ivorian models, the author ultimately suggests that neither ideological orientation—capitalist or socialist—nor foreign investment policies significantly altered development outcomes. Instead, the shared reliance on a top-down, state-centric model may have been a more decisive limiting factor.

Chapter 4 turns to pan-African socialism and its contested implementation. Rejecting simplistic comparisons between African socialisms and Marxism, Akyeampong traces the intellectual roots of pan-African socialisms to the 1945 Manchester Congress. He argues that leaders espoused socialism as part of a broader nationalist development program, framed by pan-African aspirations. The chapter identifies three recurring features across the case studies: (1) the aggressive pursuit of national development; (2) regional integration as a prerequisite for both development and full African liberation from colonial and neo-colonial relationships; and (3) the assertion of African agency at continental and international levels. The comparative analysis of Ghana, Tanzania, Guinea, and Senegal is particularly compelling in illustrating the interplay between domestic economic policy (especially import-substitution industrialization), regional integration, and global diplomatic positioning—particularly with regard to U.S. foreign policy under President Kennedy in the case of Ghana and Guinea. The case of Nkrumah's economic Africanization efforts stands out as a striking example, whose early successes were later undermined by the 1966 coup and subsequent regimes.

Lastly, Chapter 5 focuses on Ghana's relationship with the United States, particularly through Nkrumah's attempt to diversify the economy and industrialize beyond the cocoa monoculture. The centerpiece of this effort—the Akosombo Dam project—serves as a case study in both ambition and disappointment. While envisioned as a transformative infrastructure investment, the dam ultimately served U.S. corporate interests, particularly Kaiser Aluminum, rather than the Ghanaian industry. This chapter connects the history of cocoa production, Nkrumah's American formation years, Cold War diplomacy, and the entanglements of development and foreign policy. Yet, despite the failures, Akyeampong ends with a note of measured appreciation. He argues that these first-generation leaders—Nkrumah foremost among them—undertook the difficult task of envisioning and building post-colonial states under extraordinary constraints. Crucially, they were also among the first to face the consequences of their own decisions. Their reflections, literary output, and nation-building experiments, he

contends, remain indispensable to contemporary debates on African governance and development.

Overall, the book presents a compelling and well-substantiated argument, effectively combining empirical data and theoretical frameworks to evaluate the economic performance of the nations under study, as well as the decisions made by their first generation of leaders and their advisors. Akyeampong succeeds admirably in offering a nuanced, richly layered, and deeply contextualized interpretation of these choices—one that resists reductive explanations and instead situates them within the political and intellectual climate of the time. One of the book's most valuable contributions lies indeed in its exploration of the intellectual genealogies that informed early postcolonial leadership, and in its engagement with modernization and development theories as they were applied to newly independent African states.

However, a few limitations merit mention. Chief among them is the book's explicit and acknowledged "Ghana-centrism," as I would define it. Ghana serves as the central case study throughout much of the book, a choice the author justifies by noting that the original manuscript was conceived as a Ghana-specific study. This Ghana-centrism, moreover, reflects a familiar bias in Ghanaian historiography: a predominant focus on the southern regions of the country. Given the book's focus on nation-building and regional integration, a more sustained discussion of Nkrumah's relationship with the northern part of the country would have added important depth—beyond the scattered references currently offered. Additionally, the book's intellectual density and analytical sophistication, while strengths in many respects, occasionally hinder narrative flow. Frequent cross-references between chapters and the absence of a list of figures make reading and navigation sometimes challenging. Despite the richness of its content, the visual material is relatively limited: the text is supported by only two maps and ten photographs.

That said, this is a foundational work for students of African history, economics and politics, and it would be an excellent addition to any syllabus on postcolonial African history and political economy. At the same time, the book is of value also for more advanced scholars across a wide range of disciplines—from African history to the broader fields of the history of economic thought and economic methodology. Its significance lies in the author's careful reconstruction of the economic ideas and theoretical frameworks that shaped the thinking of postcolonial African political leaders. This reconstruction is notable not only for

the breadth and complexity of the subject matter but also for the methodological sophistication and historiographical precision with which it is executed. Akyeampong draws on material from eighteen archives across three continents and incorporates an extensive body of primary and secondary sources, including the prolific writings of socialist leaders themselves. As such, the volume constitutes a valuable resource for scholars interested in the transnational circulation of economic ideas, the interface between ideology and policymaking, and the methodological challenges involved in writing the intellectual history of political economy in postcolonial contexts. Finally, the author's personal motivation – rooted in disillusionment with the trajectory of the postcolonial African state – infuses the book with an urgent and reflective tone. This lends the work a forward-looking quality, urging readers to engage seriously with the historical lessons offered, and to extract from them practical insights into Africa's political and developmental future.