

American Committee on Africa

A Report on the All African People's Conference Held in Accra, Ghana

December 8-13, 1958

by George M. Houser

It was my privilege to attend the All African People's Conference held in Accra in December as a fraternal delegate. This report on the Conference represents only my own observations and opinions. Four others attended the Conference as representatives of the American Committee on Africa: William Scheinman, a New Jersey business man and member of the ACOA Executive Board, Frank Montero of New York, also an ACOA Executive Board member, Dr. Homer A. Jack of Chicago, ACOA National Committee member, and Richard Sklar, who has been in Africa several months on a fellowship from the Ford Foundation.

It should be mentioned that there were a goodly number of Americans at the Conference as individual observers or as fraternal delegates from organizations. Among these were Congressman Charles Diggs of Detroit; Dr. Marguerite Cartwright; Mrs. Mary-Louise Hooper of San Francisco who became a member of the South African delegation; Claude Barnett of the Associated Negro Press and his wife Etta Moten Barnett; Dr. Horace Mann Bond, Mercer Cook, and John Davis representing the American Society on African Culture; Irving Brown and Maida Springer of the AFL-CIO; Robert Keith of the African-American Institute; Mrs. Paul Robeson; Mrs. W. E. B. Dubois; Alphaeus Hunton, formerly Secretary of the now defunct Council on African Affairs; James Lawson of the United African Nationalist Movement, the remnant of Garveyism in the United States. Thus it can be seen that Americans at the Conference came from a number of varying backgrounds and represented differing political tendencies.

A Representative Conference; If for no other reason, the All African People's Conference was significant because it brought together the most representative gathering of African leaders ever assembled. There were about 300 delegates representing some 65 organizations coming from 28 African countries. Of the nine independent African countries only one, the Sudan, was not represented. The coup in the Sudan was too recent and the delegation which had been planning to attend no longer was satisfactory to the government. Of course, the delegations from the independent countries came representing political parties rather than their governments since this was an unofficial conference. The Tunisian Ambassador to Great Britain was present, for instance, but he represented the Neo-Destour Party, not the government. For the most part, the non-self-governing territories had their outstanding nationalist leaders in attendance. The top leaders

from South Africa could not attend because the government would not give them passports; furthermore many of them are on trial now for treason.

Strong delegations came from Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt in North Africa. In East Africa Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, and Zanzibar had delegations. Nyasaland and Northern and Southern Rhodesia in Central Africa were well represented. In West Africa the Cameroons, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal, the Ivory Coast, and Togoland all had good delegations. It was significant that leaders from the French-speaking and English-speaking areas were for the most part in contact with each other for the first time. Even the difficulties of translation inadequacies could not dull the importance of this contact across language and colonial barriers.

Almost without exception, the nationalist organizations were represented by their top leadership. Therefore, whether the colonial powers like it or not, the decisions of the Conference must be taken with some seriousness.

This Conference was not the first Pan-African meeting, for others have been held in Europe. The last one was in Manchester in 19h\$, and among the leaders of it were Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore. Padmore was the principal organizer of this Conference, and his official position is as Advisor to Nkrumah on African Affairs, But this was the first Pan-African conference ever held in Africa. One could not mistake the historical meaning of the occasion.

The Meaning of the Conference; In final analysis the Conference must be judged not

by its historical relevance or its representatives, but rather by what it did and what it meant. I would summarize the meaning of the Conference under four headings:

1. Anti-Colonialism. The Conference announced clearly that African freedom and independence are a necessity, and that the struggle to achieve this aim would continue with renewed effort. The oratory of the various delegates was aimed primarily at the evils of imperialism and colonialism. Slogans which colorfully draped the walls of the auditorium where the meetings were held reflected the theme of the occasion: "Hands Off Africa. Africa Must Be Free"; "Down With Imperialism And Colonialism," "We Prefer Independence With Danger To Servitude In Tranquility" — the last being a quotation from Nkrumah. Dr. Nkrumah's statement in his opening address that "Africa is not an extension of Europe" was greeted with enthusiastic applause. Tom Mboya of Kenya, the Conference chairman, in his first address referred to the European "scramble for Africa" in the Nineteenth Century, but said that this Conference was now telling the European powers to "scram from Africa." In the declaration on colonialism and imperialism the Conference significantly called upon "the independent African States to render maximum assistance by every means possible to the dependent peoples in their struggle ..." The Conference endorsed the joint

observance of an "Africa Freedom Day" on April 15th, the date on which the African Independent States began their first conference in 1958. A Freedom Fund was endorsed to be of aid to movements in various parts of the continent. The basic theoretical discussion of tactics revolved around nonviolence vs. violence. The Call to the Conference mentioned Gandhian nonviolence as the method to be used in the struggle for freedom. This was challenged by the Algerian delegation to the Conference as a veiled criticism of their war for independence. The final decision of the Conference was to commend nonviolent methods but also to endorse other methods if they are used because the choice is forced on the independence fighters.

2. Pan Africanism. The Conference emphasized the importance of creating an African Commonwealth, or a United States of Africa. The newly-organized union of Ghana and Guinea was warmly applauded although voices were raised to caution that the union of two small countries with a combined population of about seven million could hardly serve automatically as a base for a federation in which a large country like Nigeria with its 35 million would immediately fit. Regional federations were recommended, but not those, such as the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, imposed by European strength.

A genuine Pan-^Africanism was given expression throughout the Conference, but as pointed out by Professor St. Clair Drake (of Roosevelt University, now in Ghana), a new and important dimension has been added. Whereas until recently Pan-Africanism has always been a racial concept ("Africa for the Africans" — meaning the black Africans), now a residential element has been added. Anyone living in Africa, white or black, could be a part of the Africa of the future so long as the basic principle of democracy ("One man one vote") is accepted. Mboya pointed out: "We will not practice racism in reverse." There were no strictly anti-white utterances at the Conference, and this was a healthy sign.

3. Accra vs. Cairo. In the background of the Conference there was an obvious competition between Nasser and Nkrumah (Cairo and Accra) as a base for nationalist expression on the continent. A year ago the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Council was organized in Cairo. The Soviet Union and Communist China both are active participants in this Council, which has a permanent secretariat. In many ways, Cairo has attempted to become the headquarters for nationalist expression in Africa. Radio Cairo beams its messages in many languages to all parts of the continent. Egypt puts up most of the budget for the Solidarity Council. And various elements in nationalist movements have been urged to set up headquarters in Cairo. So far representatives of groups in the Cameroons, Kenya, Uganda, and Algeria have offices there. Leaders from other parts of the continent are being urged to visit Cairo, expenses paid.

But there is suspicion of Egyptian intentions on the part of many nationalist leaders South of the Sahara. The single most discussed statement of the Conference was made by Nkrumah: "Do not let us forget that colonialism and

imperialism may come to us yet in different guise — not necessarily from Europe. We must alert ourselves to be able to recognize this when it rears its head and prepare ourselves to fight against it." It was never concretely explained whom Nkrumah was talking about. Was it Communism, American economic power, or Nasser ambition? Whatever he may have had specifically in mind, it is no secret that he was anxious to offset Cairo influence.

The Cairo Solidarity Council sent thirteen fraternal delegates to Accra. I had a lengthy talk with the principal member of the secretariat of the Solidarity Council. He admitted that they were fearful of the competition which would come from Accra and had come to the Conference hoping to forestall this. In many ways they succeeded, although how permanently remains to be seen. I was told that the delegation had brought a good bit of literature with them for general distribution at the Conference, but they did not distribute it. Apparently they felt that the prejudice against Cairo influence would be increased by too much overt activity. This was undoubtedly a correct assumption, for the Conference was dominated, numerically, by delegations coming from countries South of the Sahara. I was told by the Cairo representative that the Accra Conference was of real value to them because contacts had been made which up to that time they had not been able to make on their own.

A crucial decision of the Conference had to do with the establishment of a permanent secretariat located in Accra. Resolutions coming out of several of the committees recommended this, and it was accepted. Implementation of the resolution was left in the hands of the Steering Committee, which met after the Conference had formally adjourned. I had left Accra before decisions of this Committee were announced, but the information reaching me is that there was no agreement on personnel for the secretariat. Thus the decision is put off until a meeting of the Steering Committee is held in Cairo in April. Ivy- guess is that Cairo representatives played an important role in postponing decision on personnel. The real work in following up the decisions of the Conference cannot be done, of course, without personnel. In the months ahead there will be juggling for position in the new Pan-African organization established. But the basic decision about locating the organization in Accra was a victory for the Nkrumah forces even if this decision is not effectively implemented for a few months.

k. International Outlook. The Conference only inferentially addressed itself to the problem of a position in the international power struggle. Essentially the Conference was establishing itself as another concrete expression of the "African personality." The foreign policy outlook of most of the delegates probably could be summarized in the words: "Non-alignment and positive neutrality." The Western powers came in for much more concrete criticism than did the Soviet, of course, because the African peoples have been affected by Western policy rather than by Communist policy. There was condemnation of NATO's role in supplying weapons to France for carrying on the war in Algeria. Critical reference was made to military bases of Western powers' on African soil. There was strong opposition

to the plan for testing nuclear weapons in the Sahara. But there was no attempt in any speech or in a Conference resolution to make an analysis of the international situation and to delineate an "African" position.

At the present time there is negligible Russian influence in Africa, There was a delegation of seven Russian observers at the Conference. Only one among these was really a scholar of African affairs, I. I. Potekhin, Deputy Director of the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. I had a long talk with him. He pointed out that Soviet interest in Africa is new, but very live, that there is no effective non-governmental organization at work in Russia, but that it is a growing field. I was told by the Cairo Solidarity Council representatives, however, that the Russian Afro-Asian Councils are among the most active of their branches. But it is patently clear that Russian influence is potential and still in the future in Africa. Nevertheless, it is also clear that this influence will grow unless the problem of racism in the multi-racial areas of Africa moves toward solution and unless the Algerian war is brought to an end. The U.S.S.R., as indicated by its active participation in the Cairo Council and its keen interest in Accra, is planning a major move into Africa with every opening available.

The United States and the Conference: It is my opinion that unless the United States takes a much more forthright position on crucial issues in Africa, American influence will decline steadily. Prime Minister Olympio of Togoland said to me: "Everyone is our friend after we are independent. But our real friends are those who support us in the difficult days of our struggle." It is now clearly obvious that rapid steps are being made toward independence in all parts of Africa. The United States can be and should be much more vocal in its support of responsible movements for independence in Africa, including Algeria.

The approach of the United States authorities to the Accra Conference was illustrative of a certain lack of perception about the vitality of the nationalist movements in Africa. For instance, there was no greeting from an official government spokesman as the Conference opened. Greetings from Khrushchev and Chou en-Lai were cheered. Dr. Nkrumah was keenly disturbed that nothing had come from Washington. Late in the Conference a message came from Vice-President Nixon, but only as a result of pressure from Congressman Diggs and Claude Barnett. An unsigned statement dated November 2k "by an official spokesman of the United States government" had been handed to Dr. Nkrumah. But this was a lukewarm statement quite out of keeping with the spirit of the Conference. It is fortunate that no mention of it was made at the Conference, for it would have hurt American prestige further.

It is understood that United States governmental policy must be handled carefully because of ties with European powers. Although I feel keenly that the United States does not need to be as cautious as it is, the fact that it is cautious makes the role of a non-governmental organization such as the American Committee on Africa so much the more important. Organizations like the ACOA have a certain

respect from responsible nationalist elements in various parts of Africa. I was Impressed by the number of delegates from various African organizations who approached me in Accra asking for assistance. One from the Cameroons said that Communist China had just given over \$33,000 to support a Communist element within the movement in the Cameroons. How could his group offset this influence, he wanted to know. A person from Nyasaland said he had received an offer of help from Cairo, but didn't want to take it. Could we be of assistance? Perhaps the most effective thing the ACOA could do would be to raise special funds to support concrete projects in support of equality and freedom in Africa. This might be the best type of program to insure the influence of democratic forces in the new Africa that is being born.