

Boxing and Pan-Africanism: Kwame Nkrumah Meets Roy Ankrah

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African boxing and boxers merged into the consciousness of the different societies fighting for liberation from colonial control and as such the careers of the most successful ones became entwined with the nationalist sentiments of the day as the connection between Roy Ankrah's British Empire title win and Kwame Nkrumah's release from British detention showed. — Excerpt from "The Africans: Boxing and Africa" by Adeyinka Makinde, Chapter 8 of the Cambridge Companion to Boxing

February 12th 1951 is a day writ large in the history of Ghana. It was the day that Kwame Nkrumah was released from detention by the British colonial authorities in the Gold Coast, later to become the independent state of Ghana in 1957.

Nkrumah, perhaps the greatest purveyor of Pan-Africanism, was encouraging of African endeavour in all fields of human existence. This included lauding the achievements of boxers such as Roy Ankrah who became the first African fighter to win a British Empire boxing championship, and Dick Tiger, the three-time world champion whose 1963 bout with Gene Fullmer in the city of Ibadan was the first world title bout held in "black Africa".

As I note in my chapter on Africa and boxing in the Cambridge Companion to Boxing, African boxers reflected the nationalist aspirations of the day and their achievements intensified the Pan-Africanist sentiments of the times as evidenced for instance by the popularity of Hogan Bassey among South Africans.

Boxers also played a part in ethnicized revolts in the post-independence era. Many Ga boxers, as part of the "Tokyo Joe" sub-culture, represented a form of resistance against the ruling government of Ghana, while Dick Tiger, Nigeria's "Pugilistic Plenipotentiary" would become a propagandist for the secessionist state of Biafra.

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Featured image: Roy Ankrah (Left) the featherweight champion of the British Empire with Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, leader of the independence movement of the Gold Coast which later became Ghana.

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