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Ghana and America

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Kofi Atta Annan came of age in an era of optimism in Africa. In 1957, when the nineteen-year-old completed secondary schooling, his native Gold Coast changed its name to Ghana, lowered the Union Jack, and entered history as the first European colony in tropical Africa to attain independence. Many colonies followed swiftly, and the world was treated to a new and swelling host of colorful flags, exotic robes, and handsome, dark leaders. Africa brimmed with good feelings, electric in hope, and they were shared by the new secondary school graduate.

“I think we were all optimistic,” Annan recalled a little wistfully more than forty years later. “We were all very hopeful and determined to help build our nations. We were determined to get education, learn a trade, and make a contribution.”

So much cynicism and disappointment cloud our view of Africa now that it is not easy to recall the American excitement about Africa half a century ago. Soon after John Kennedy’s election as president in 1960, the Kennedy family helped pay for Tom Mboya’s airlift of young Kenyans to small colleges in America. Ghana was the first country to receive a contingent of volunteers from the new

Peace Corps, and they descended from their plane in Accra to sing the national anthem “Yen Ara Asaasa Ni” (This Is Our Homeland) in Twi, one of the native languages. American journalists and doctoral candidates, as ignorant of Africa as the *New York Herald’s* Henry M. Stanley when he searched for Dr. Livingstone almost a century before, fanned over the continent in search of its strange flavors and customs.

There were some doubters. In a 1953 cover story anticipating independence for the Gold Coast, *Time* magazine warned that “the educated few who climb from darkness to light . . . are likely to become the dupes of Communism.” But by and large, Americans were entranced by the procession of new states and the awakening of what they regarded as the Dark Continent.

The enthusiasm of Americans would mark the life of the young Kofi Annan. He was born with a twin sister on April 8, 1938, in Kumasi, the capital of the ancient, inland kingdom of Ashanti in the Gold Coast. The family included three older sisters and later a younger brother. Although he had spent much of his life in the heartland of the Ashanti people and had a trace of Ashanti descent, his father, Henry Reginald Annan, was actually a Fante nobleman who could trace his lineage to chiefs. Kofi’s mother, Victoria, also was Fante. The Fante, a coastal tribe, had sided with the British in the nineteenth-century wars against the Ashanti that ended with the annexation of the Gold Coast as a British colony. Henry was an executive of the United Africa Company, the African subsidiary of the Anglo-Dutch corporation Unilever, and his main responsibility was the purchase of cocoa for export. The Gold Coast was then the largest producer of cocoa in the world and, by African standards, rich because of it. After his retirement, Henry served as chairman of the Ghana International Bank and other government agencies and won election as governor of Ashanti Province.

Henry Reginald and Victoria bore English Christian names, for they were part of the early elite class of Africans educated by Christian missionaries who encouraged them to modernize with British ways. But British rule was beginning to trouble the African elite by

this time, and the couple returned to African tradition and the Ghanian language of Akan to name their children. The new boy was called Kofi (Akan for Born on a Friday) and Atta (Akan for Twin). The embrace of African names did not mean any revolutionary break with English and Christian tradition. Henry and Victoria still regarded themselves as strong Christians and took the family to services of the Anglican Church.

Kofi once said he was brought up “atribal in a tribal world.” In an old photograph of perhaps fifty members of the extended Annan family, taken when Kofi was perhaps six years old, most of the men wear suits and ties. Perhaps half the women wear European frocks and bonnets while the other half have African head ties and traditional dresses. Kofi himself is sporting a jacket with short pants. The photograph looks more like a portrait of a family in Michigan in the 1940s than a family in Africa.

The elders in the family liked to bombard Kofi with traditional proverbs to guide his life. One of his favorites is “You don’t hit a man on the head when you’ve got your fingers between his teeth.” But his father preferred more modern guidance. After dinner, he sometimes held mock trials to judge acts of tomfoolery and naughtiness by the children. He seemed less interested in punishing the children than in encouraging them to explain their behavior with honesty and confidence, without stuttering and shuffling. Kofi often won his father over with a joke.

Kofi’s younger brother, Kobina, now the Ghanian ambassador to Morocco, describes his father as “strict, a stickler for time, and stoic.” In one searing incident, while Kofi visited his father’s office, a junior manager was summoned to discuss some accounts. The young man arrived hurriedly with a cigarette in his hand. Aware that his boss frowned on smoking, he thrust the lit cigarette into his pants pocket. With his pocket burning, he answered Henry Reginald’s questions in obvious discomfort. After he left, a shocked Kofi asked his father why he had forced the young man into such an unfortunate position. His father lectured that he had not forced the young man to do anything. He could have extinguished the cigarette in an ashtray or

kept on smoking. "Today you saw something you should never do," his father told Kofi. "Don't crawl."

Henry Reginald had no patience for those who failed to show up for events on time. "Those of us who didn't know time got a little heat from him," says Kobina. As a leader of the Freemasons, Henry Reginald once organized a social event at the Kumasi lodge. Five minutes after the scheduled time for the party, he closed the doors, shutting out all latecomers. As governor, Kobina recalls, Henry Reginald called off his cocktail parties if the bulk of the guests failed to show up half an hour after the scheduled time. "Those who voted for you would not like that at all," says Kobina. "But he was not a politician."

"We lived in every part of Ghana when I was growing up," Annan told the City University of New York's UN Intellectual History Project, "because he [his father] was a district manager and he moved from district to district. Sometimes he'd go there for a couple of years, and we'd go to school there. And then, of course, when he became director, we moved . . . to Accra. . . . It was very interesting for me to grow up dealing with and getting to know so many different groups in Ghana. It gave you a sense of being able to relate to everybody and different groups at a young age."

Henry Reginald's political instincts rarely took him to the mainstream of Ghanaian politics. After World War II, he joined most of Ghana's intellectuals in a new political party, the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC), which campaigned for eventual home rule as a self-governing British colony. In 1947, the UGCC invited one of its best-educated compatriots abroad to come home and lead the party as secretary-general. He was Kwame Nkrumah, a graduate of Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Lincoln, long known as "the black Princeton," was the alma mater as well of poet Langston Hughes, the future U.S. Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall, and the future Nigerian president Nnamdi Azikiwe. Nkrumah also received postgraduate degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, the London School of Economics, and the University of London.

Nkrumah soon proved too fiery for elite Africans like Henry Reginald Annan. In turn, the new secretary-general found his educated colleagues too milquetoast for his own taste. The UGCC proclaimed that it wanted self-government “in the shortest possible time.” Nkrumah deplored such gradualism and called instead for Home Rule Now! and later for Independence Now! Within two years, he broke with the UGCC to lead a new party, the Convention People’s Party (CPP). In the Annan household, Henry Reginald disdained Nkrumah and his “veranda boys”—the poorly educated, idle young men who whipped up enthusiasm and sometimes riots for Nkrumah.

Nkrumah’s emotional appeal excited the Gold Coast. His popularity swelled even more when the British jailed him for leading a strike. In 1951, his party won a landslide victory—twenty-nine out of thirty-three seats in the Legislative Assembly—in the first election allowed by the British. Faced with political reality, the British finally relented, released Nkrumah from prison, and allowed him to serve as prime minister of the self-governing colony of the Gold Coast and finally in 1957 as prime minister of the independent nation of Ghana. Kofi Annan mused years later that the history of Ghana might have been far happier if Nkrumah had come to power surrounded by educated elite like Henry Reginald rather than by the veranda boys.

Nkrumah, with his high forehead and gold and blue kente robe draped over one shoulder, soon became a familiar world figure. Though Ghana had a population of less than ten million, Nkrumah, with all his preaching for pan-Africanism, tried to assume the mantle of prospective or, at least, symbolic leader of Africa as a whole. He created a union with Guinea and Mali in hopes that it would act as the embryonic nucleus of a future continental nation. His projects were grand. He even created a Ghana news agency to compete with the Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France Presse, and all the other international channels of news that were controlled by what he regarded as the neoimperialist corporations of Europe and the United States.

Kofi did not have a role in all the excitement of the Nkrumah-led march to independence, for he spent those years in boarding school in the hill area near the town of Cape Coast. The British believed in the need to isolate students from the turmoil of everyday life so that their bodies and minds could be nurtured in a tranquil academic clime. Nowhere was this more evident than in Mfantshipim, the elite secondary school for boys founded by British Methodist missionaries in 1876. Francis Bartels, the Ghanaian headmaster, did not encourage his students to take part in all the Nkrumah rallies for independence. Bartels, in fact, detested Nkrumah as a leader “determined to model his political actions on the successes of Hitler.” Yet the political transformations did not leave his boys untouched. “To see the changes taking place,” Annan told the intellectual history project, “to see the British hand over to the Ghanians, and have a Ghanaian prime minister . . . you grew up with a sense that change is possible, all is possible.”

Kofi entered Mfantshipim as a fifteen-year-old in 1953. “Kofi was very affable and jovial, full of wit and character,” recalls Akipataki Akiwumi-Thompson, a classmate who is now a businessman in Accra. “He was always making us laugh.” Upperclassmen had the authority to punish their juniors for infractions such as talking after lights out or showing up at inspection with dirty fingernails. The usual punishment required the offender to write one hundred lines of ten words each. Kofi had a knack for talking his way out of most punishment. “He had his way of not antagonizing the seniors while talking to them,” says Akiwumi-Thompson. “By the time he was finished, he could calm them down and persuade them not to punish him. Or if he couldn’t, he could talk them into compromise.” He might have to write fifty lines instead of a hundred.

The school was run much like a private boarding school in Britain. The boys arose at 5:30 A.M. After a cold shower, they dressed and lined up for inspection, showing the housemaster, an upper-classman, their combed hair, cleaned nails, and neat shirts. They breakfasted on tea, porridge, and toast with marmalade, and then headed into a full day of classes with English, Scottish, and a few

Ghanian teachers, followed by study and sports. Kofi proved an excellent sprinter on the track. After dinner and homework, lights were out at 8:30 P.M. for younger boys, somewhat later for older boys. At the end of the school year, they had to take the same Cambridge examinations required of students in Britain. Like the graduates of Eton and Harrow in England, the alumni of Mfantsipim, still an elite school in Ghana, call themselves “Old Boys.”

One of Kofi’s noticeable achievements at Mfantsipim was to lead a strike protesting the poor quality of the food in the dining hall. “We kept telling them and they wouldn’t do anything, so we arranged it in such a way—about six hundred or seven hundred of us—that on a Sunday nobody ate,” Annan told the Intellectual History Project. “Having arranged to make sure they had something to eat first, when we went to the dining room we all refused to eat. The housemaster tried to calm the situation down, but he couldn’t. . . . The place was in pandemonium.”

Bartels, the Ghanian headmaster, called Kofi to his office the next morning. “Young Annan,” he said, “I understand you had something to do with all this strike nonsense. If you have an issue to discuss, come to me and we’ll discuss it man to man. You are reasonably intelligent. Given the chance, you may become a useful member of society.”

Otherwise Kofi’s acts of schoolboy defiance seem minor. Bartels allowed the boys to walk almost twenty miles to a girls’ secondary school on Saturdays but refused them permission to bicycle there. He felt that bikes were dangerous on the road. “I did not want them to compete with the mammy wagons,” says Bartels, recalling the overladen trucks that thundered on West African roads with people and freight, “and I did not want them to waste their money.” Nevertheless, Kofi and a few buddies would rent bicycles and peddle their way to the girls. Bartels never caught them.

Kofi and a few other classmates would sit on the floor in the headmaster’s office for weekly lessons in “spoken English.” In a preface to the memoirs of Bartels, published in 2003, the secretary-general recalled that the headmaster had once “put a broad sheet of

white paper on the wall, with a little black dot in the right-hand corner, and asked, ‘Boys, what do you see?’” The boys shouted in unison, “A black dot.” Bartels then admonished them, “So not a single one of you saw the broad white sheet of paper. You only saw the black dot. This is the awful thing about human nature. People never see the goodness of things and the broader picture. Don’t go through life with that attitude.”

In the classrooms, however, Kofi’s performance was not stellar. Of course, passing the entrance examination for Mfantsipim put him among the elite of Ghanaian students; only two hundred out of three thousand applicants were admitted for Kofi’s first year. But he lagged behind many of his classmates. “He was a late developer,” Bartels, who is now ninety-five years old and lives in Paris, told me recently. “There is nothing to be ashamed of. My own son was a late developer. It takes a little longer. If you asked me then if Kofi Annan was going to be secretary-general, I would have said, ‘Not on your life.’ He made so much of so little.”

Under the old British colonial system, pupils had to take an examination to pass from the Fifth Form to the Sixth Form in secondary school. The Sixth Form, the final year, prepared students to enter a university for a classical education. Most Mfantsipim Sixth Form pupils moved on to the University College of the Gold Coast at Achimota. But Kofi did not score high enough on the examination. “Although his father was a good friend,” says Bartels, “I just could not push him into Form Six.” So Kofi left Mfantsipim and entered the new Kumasi Institute of Science and Technology, a British-operated technical college. Since technical studies were not as prestigious as classical studies in Ghanaian eyes, the technical college had lower standards for entry than the University College.

In his second year at the Kumasi Institute, Kofi was elected vice president of the Ghana national students union. This brought him to a conference of African student leaders in Sierra Leone, where he drew the attention of a representative of the Ford Foundation acting as a kind of talent scout. Reflecting the American excitement about Africa, foundation executives were trying to attract Africans to study

in the United States while encouraging future American professors to mount their Ph.D. fieldwork in Africa. Kofi was awarded a scholarship under the Ford Foundation's Foreign Student Leadership Program to study at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Credited for his studies in Ghana, Annan entered Macalester in the fall of 1959 as a junior. Macalester, a small liberal arts college founded in 1874 with the help of the Presbyterian Church, prided itself as a school with international interests. It even flew the flag of the United Nations beneath the American flag on its main staff. The experience at Macalester was defining. The twenty-one-year-old student had never set foot outside Africa before. But the strangeness and pace of college life in America did not overwhelm him. He was a soft-spoken and polite young man but far from shy, and he rushed into a myriad of activities with striking energy and curiosity. He had never been surrounded by so many whites before, but that did not intimidate or bother him in any way. They were as interested in him as he was in them, and he related to his classmates with good-humored ease.

His range of activities was extraordinary. He even tried out for the football team his first day on campus. The coach was impressed by Annan's speed but not his size. Perhaps, the coach mused, he might make a punt returner. Two linemen, including David Lanegran, now a professor of geography and urban studies at Macalester, were ordered to take part in a punting drill with Kofi. "They would punt at Kofi," Lanegran recalls. "We would rush at him. But we were under strict orders not to touch him. We didn't want to scare him. But he was a soccer player, not a football player. He really couldn't catch the ball. His football career lasted about a day." Annan remembers his football failings somewhat differently. "It was okay so long as I kept running and no one caught up with me," he told a reporter for the college magazine, *Macalester Today*, in 1998. "Otherwise, I was like a piece of paper. I weighed 138 pounds. . . . So I gave it up after 15 minutes."

An African acquaintance kidded Kofi at the time about trying to kill himself on his very first day in school. But Kofi countered that

his tryout had been motivated by curiosity about the sport, a desire to meet the players, and the rumor that “the boys on the football team get on very well with the girls.” The football escapade did not close his athletic career at Macalester. On the track team, he set a school record in the sixty-yard dash that lasted a dozen years, and he was a mainstay of the soccer team throughout his stay.

In theory, Annan knew all about winter, for he had studied European seasons in school textbooks and had to answer questions about winter on the British examinations administered in colonial Africa. But he was not prepared for a Minnesota winter. The softness of snow surprised him. So did the bitterness of cold. He followed the example of his classmates and wore several layers of clothing. But he stubbornly refused to wear the ridiculous and unsightly earmuffs that clasped their heads. But one day the temperature plunged, with wind chill, to thirty-five degrees below zero, and Kofi, walking to classes, felt his ears cringe in terrible pain, so bitter he felt they would snap off. He rushed to a store and bought the largest pair of earmuffs he could find. The lesson, as he liked to tell students at Macalester many years later, was “Never think you know more than the natives do.”

Macalester officials knew so little about Ghana and Africa and the British colonial school system that they assigned Kofi, a junior, to a freshman English class. The class had twenty Americans and four foreigners. Three weeks after the semester began, the English teacher subjected his students to a spelling test. He dictated seventy-eight words. According to the notes she jotted down at the time, Keek Sugawara Abe, a Japanese student, got twenty-six wrong. She marveled that one American student did almost as bad—twenty-five wrong. The worst score came from an Iranian student—thirty-two wrong. Kofi scored highest, none or perhaps one wrong. In a few more weeks, the teacher excused Kofi from attending class. Kofi’s English was too good, the teacher said, to waste his time on freshman English.

Shortly after Kofi’s arrival, Harvey Rice, president of the college, introduced the young Ghanaian at a convocation of the students.

Kofi addressed them for a little more than twenty minutes with a speech about Africa. "The story of colonialism in Africa," he said, "is the story of exploitation, bullying, suppression, and brutality." His words sound somewhat naive and dogmatic now, but it was the typical rhetoric of young educated Africans in those days, and young educated Americans loved to hear it.

A tape recording of the speech exists, offering wonderful insights into the demeanor of the young man. His soft voice resembled that of his later years, though he sometimes rushed his words then with youthful eagerness. His accent was much the same—an educated British West African accent with an occasional lilting use of "in" at the end of a word instead of "ing." He said "understandin'" for example, rather than "understanding." Despite his ringing denunciation of colonialism, his speech was mainly measured and informative as he surveyed the pace of independence in every region of Africa. To close, he could not resist joking about his football tryout.

Kofi had no trouble at his tryout for the debate team. "I was immediately struck," says Roger K. Mosvick, a retired professor of communications who was the coach of the Macalester debate team then, "with his wonderful, powerful, Ghanaian, Oxford-like accent." The young student offered a speech about the responsibility of the United States toward the newly developing nations of Africa and the rest of the world. "I was just floored," Mosvick recalls. "It was a very prescient oration for the times. He had a powerful delivery. He was very soft-spoken but certainly knew how to use volume. There was very little I had to do." With Kofi making the same speech, the Macalester team would win the Minnesota state debate competition.

During the summer, Harry W. Morgan, a Macalester adviser, shepherded Kofi and a few other foreign students on a tour of the United States. Morgan had been hired by DeWitt Wallace, a Macalester alumnus and a founder of *Reader's Digest*, to develop international exchange programs at the college. A Nash Ambassador sedan was donated, and Morgan dubbed the project "Ambassadors of Friendship." The foreign students were so curious about America

that they spent a night at a Salvation Army home for the poor in Kansas, and they persuaded the sheriff to let them spend a night in the jail of Flagstaff, Arizona.

Since the tour moved through several southern states during the Jim Crow era, Kofi encountered blatant racial slurs and discrimination. One barber refused him service with a curt, "We don't cut niggers' hair." Kofi replied, "I'm not a nigger. I'm from Africa." The barber then cut his hair. When he told a friend, Susan Linnee, about the incident, he seemed bemused, not angry. Like most educated West Africans of his day, especially after independence, Kofi tended to look on the racial problems of the United States more with scholarly curiosity than personal anger. Unlike Kenya and Rhodesia, British West Africa did not attract large numbers of white settlers who took land away from the Africans to make permanent homes. The British came to the Gold Coast only in small numbers and only as administrators. Few stayed very long. In the march to independence, Gold Coast Africans felt they were struggling against the British government and the British administration, not against whites.

Kofi's college friendships extended beyond Macalester. Linnee, a University of Minnesota student in St. Paul's twin city of Minneapolis, was introduced to the young Ghanaian by his Swiss roommate, Roy Preiswerk, a friend of her boyfriend (and later husband). Kofi and a friend visited Susan at her family home in the Minneapolis suburbs one evening while her parents were away. A neighbor spied Kofi and phoned police to report a strange black man near the house. The police later informed her father. When the parents, who had not yet met Kofi, realized what had happened, they became very angry at their neighbors over the incident. The parents then invited Kofi and his roommate to a family dinner. When Kofi and the roommate showed up in their jalopy, a pink Studebaker, Susan's parents stepped out onto the porch so all neighbors could see them greet Kofi in the waning daylight.

A lifelong friendship developed between Susan Linnee and Kofi. Linnee, who has retired from the Associated Press after a

distinguished career as a foreign correspondent, tried to recall recently what Annan was like in those college days. "He was very much the way he is now," she said. "He was very self-possessed and very self-confident. He was at ease with himself. It was something that made him attractive to everyone. He came from a tradition of trying to bring everyone into your circle, and he wanted to bring everyone into the circle." That placid, confident, open demeanor, so evident in the Macalester era, became his trademark. It is a manner that entrances his admirers today even as it annoys his detractors.

Annan intended to return to Ghana after graduation from Macalester with a B.A. in economics. He spent the summer working in the New York office of Pillsbury, a Minneapolis company (now owned by General Mills) that hoped to build a flour mill in Ghana. As soon as the deal was signed with the Ghanaian government, Annan would head home and represent Pillsbury there, keeping to a career line much like that of his father.

The news from Ghana, however, was dispiriting. Nkrumah had scrapped the Ghanaian parliamentary system in favor of a presidential state with himself at the head. He began arresting political opponents and jailing them without trial. His government tried to inculcate the youth with both Ghanaian nationalism and Nkrumah adulation through its Young Pioneers and its Kwame Nkrumah Training Institute. Lackeys referred to Nkrumah as "Osageyfo" (Victorious Leader) and, with unctuous reverence, "Our President." When the Anglican bishop of Accra decried the adulation as an atheistic attempt to confuse the acts of Nkrumah with that of God, he was deported. Nkrumah would soon declare a one-party state with himself as president for life. His grandiose pan-African schemes depleted reserves, while his failed attempts at rapid industrialization diverted resources and energy from the vital cocoa crop. The lobby of the new Ambassador Hotel in Accra was fraying and crowding with East European officials seeking contracts. The Pillsbury deal fell through—Nkrumah gave the contract to Bulgaria. Kofi Annan would not come home to follow in the footsteps of his father.

