

H.E. Kofi Annan-Busumuru (1938-2018), 7th Secretary General of the United Nations: A Personal Appreciation

by

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H.E. Kofi Annan, the 7th Secretary-General of the United Nations Organization, was one of those extraordinary individuals, a *rara avis*. Soft-spoken, always impeccably attired, even in casual clothes, compassionate, Kofi Annan, as many simply called him, always sounded like a close friend or acquaintance, even from the lofty position that he held, he exuded the inner peace which seemed to flow like an imaginary halo whenever and in whatever situation he appeared to operate – calm, courteous, and effective.



To us Foreign Service, Career diplomats, he was the model we sought to emulate, without quite succeeding. But that was not for want of trying. Our shortcomings were simply too many. He was above all a great source of pride to Ghana, Ghanaians, and people of African descent everywhere, especially in a world where Africa was often begrudged her due respect. As chance would have it, I found myself in Kingston, Jamaica, just before his election as Secretary-General, attending a Law of the Sea Conference. I recall that in the company of the then Secretary-General of the International Sea Bed Authority, Nil Allotey Odunton, a Jamaican official aware of our Ghanaian nationality stopped to congratulate us on his election. He added, for effect, “You Ghanaians, you owe all this to Kwame Nkrumah whom you unwisely overthrew.” We were taken aback. Such was the respect and shared joy that Kofi Annan brought Africans generally.

To be honest, I cannot claim to have known His Excellency Kofi Annan too well. While serving as the Deputy Permanent Representative of Ghana to the United Nations (2001-2004) in New York, I had the privilege to meet him from time to time. So it is probably fair to say, perhaps vicariously, one knew enough about him, especially from my friend and colleague, Amb. Patrick Reginald Dennis Hayford, who worked closely with him and managed his office on the 38th floor. Patty had so much respect and admiration for His Excellency Kofi Annan, and he kept us all informed about the enduring virtues of the man we all considered our collective mentor, and our idol in International Public Service. He did his job so well that he became a global icon.

I recall that in 1993, 1994 or thereabouts, when the United States Government declined to support the re-election of the First African Secretary-General, Dr. Butros Butros Ghali, the idea of an African replacement came up. Kofi Annan was then Head of Peacekeeping (DPKO) and, as the most senior African official in the United Nations Secretariat, the question of his candidature, quite naturally, came up.

In a communication from the Foreign Ministry to all Ghana Missions, a strategy to mobilize political support for our candidate, Kofi, was unveiled. The strategy bore the distinct blend of understated subtlety and nuance that became Kofi Annan's hallmark during his tenure as Secretary-General. It was clear that he had become the preferred candidate of the United States – the sole remaining superpower. While this was a factor in his favour, the outcome was by no means assured. French President Jacques Chirac had opposed his candidature, ostensibly on account of a perception that Kofi did not speak French. It turned out that he had spoken too soon.

Rather than come out openly and assert his fluency in French, Kofi, ever the suave diplomat, chose the indirect route. During a press conference at which the matter came up, Kofi, in answer, broke into perfect French, to the surprise of his opponents and to the obvious delight of his supporters. After this, he added with a wry smile, "I have now learnt to speak English with a French accent". This story might well be apochryphal, but that did not get in the way of Ghanaians propagating it. From then on, getting Kofi Annan elected Secretary-General became a national assignment. The Government of Jerry Rawlings can be forgiven for seeking to take some credit for it. The campaign was expertly executed under the leadership of the Foreign Minister, Dr Obed Asamoah, his deputy, Dr. Ibn Chambas and Ambassador J.V. Gbeho.

Earlier in the week, a Times of London editorial had published, in supposedly allegorical terms, an account which had all the hallmarks of the ill-concealed racism that we have come to associate with our former colonial master. The article bemoaned the convention which required the election of the United Nations Secretary-General to be decided by regional rotation. This meant Africa could not be excluded. To the Times, Africa was a continent which could not provide any demonstrable evidence of suitability. The insinuation was that, the job was too important to be left in the hands of an African. This practice, the Times bemoaned, was akin to "Buggin's turn". Kofi got elected anyway. And what an inspired choice it turned out to be.

With the benefit hindsight, it is fair to say that, in spite of the fact that this period was one of the most complex in the history of the United Nations, (what with 9/11, the Iraqi invasion, crisis in the Balkans, a broke UN organization), Kofi Annan proved to have been, not only the most effective Secretary General to date: he was the most charismatic, the most-loved, the most respected and, clearly, the best. He executed his duties with flair, panache and grace. Urbane, courteous, self-effacing to the point of coyness, Kofi addressed the most complicated international crises with a quiet self-assurance, demonstrating his innate integrity. In this he often found refuge in African proverbs full of native wisdom – often delivered delicately in unaffected Ghanaian cadences. His Ghanaian accent remained unchanged, in spite of all the years spent in the United States. Blessed with a genuinely charming self-deprecating sense of humour, he never seemed to take himself too seriously. He was often able to laugh at himself – a noble trait seen only in genuinely great people, like Nelson Mandela, in whom he found a formidable kindred soul.

In 2001, while serving as Charge d’Affaires in the Ghana Mission in Havana, Cuba, I was suddenly transferred to the Ghana Mission to the United Nations in New York. This was as much a blessing as a curse. I had barely arrived in New York when 9/11 struck, and the world as we knew it was never the same again. I was to be Deputy to His Excellency Nana Effah Appenteng, a career diplomat and Bompatahene, from whom I was able to learn quite a lot about multilateral diplomacy. Great are the virtues of adversity, for His Excellency Nana was quite a hard taskmaster.

For a Ghanaian diplomat in New York when Kofi was Secretary-General, you were aware that all eyes were on you. You could therefore not afford to be late for any meeting. And when you made an intervention, it was expected to carry weight. At meetings, anytime you looked up, the Secretary-General was there on the podium. You could feel his gaze. You had to sound wise – not always possible. Your colleague diplomats from other countries somehow felt that you had more influence than you actually let on. Deep down, you knew you did not. It was useful however, if others believed so, you did not always press the point. On one occasion, during one of the many crises in West Africa which had caught the attention of the UN Security Council, i.e. the civil wars in Cote d’Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone – Foreign Minister Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, as he then was, led a delegation of West African Foreign Ministers to the Security Council Debate on Crises in West Africa. In his capacity as Chair of the ECOWAS, Dr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas was present. Kofi Annan U.N. Secretary-General was present. Behind him sat Amb. Patrick Hayford. He was then Director of Africa in the Cabinet of the Secretary-General. Introducing the Debate, Kofi Annan concluded his remarks with MEMA MO NINYRAA AKWAABA. When H. E. Nana Addo took the floor, he spoke, extempore, in the Queen’s English. I thought I saw a smile break out on the visage of the British Ambassador as the debate went on. Nana Addo’s English, had had the desired effect. He recognized be a kindred soul. When the Debate concluded, the UN Secretariat requested for the written statement. This was mandatory UN Security Council procedure.

Statements at the Security Council for were carefully parsed. But Nana Addo, had spoken without notes, as if in court. That was the whole problem. Fortunately, as a career Foreign Service Officer, I had taken notes. I had to rush to the Ghana Mission on 47th and Madison (if I recall correctly) to have it transcribed, typed out and distributed. On our way out of the Security Council, the Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs, an Englishman whose surname I suppose was Pendergrass, sidled up to Nana Addo. I found the following exchange quite amusing: “Mr. Minister, you are a Barrister, are you not?” “I am indeed”, came the response. Vintage Nana. I said to myself, “Brofo!” As I watched the proceedings, I could not help feeling amused and gratified at what a long way one had come from catching crabs and playing gutter to gutter at Osu Kaajano, to the United Nations Security Council – evidence of the truly transformative power of Education.

For us Foreign Service Officers, we admired Kofi-Annan so much that we could only speak about him in hushed tones. Such was the profundity of some of his sayings. On Education for instance Kofi stated “Education is a human right with the immense power to transform. On its foundation rests the cornerstones of freedom, democracy and sustainable human development.” And again, on racism we hear him: “We may have different religions, different languages, different coloured skin, but we all belong to the human race.” On Iran, he said “There can be no development without long-term peace and stability and there can be no peace and stability without the rule of law and respect for human rights.”

Even though he was very conscious of his role as UN Secretary-General, he never compromised on his Ghanaianess. His accent was quintessentially Ghanaian. He wrote a touching letter to the Black Stars after we were cheated out of a semi-final place at the World Cup in South Africa by the hand of Suarez. He always kept an interest in Ghanaian matters and was always available for Ghana. Yet he would not be dragged into politics. He sought to keep Ghana stable especially during elections when sometimes things appeared to get out of hand. I saw a moving letter he sent to President John Mahama on his conceding defeat to Nana Akufo-Addo. When Cote d’Ivoire and Ghana were getting uncomfortably restless about the border (after the discovery of oil), he invited the principals to Geneva and tried to get them to reach an amicable solution. That was not to be. Litigation duly ensued. I was on the Ghana delegation. In Geneva, he walked up to me starting a conversation in Amharic, the lingua franca of Ethiopia. When he noticed my knowledge of Amharic was nothing to write home about, he chided, me ever so gently. “You should be ashamed of yourself.” He was a very kind person – “If one is going to err, we should err on the side of liberty and freedom”, he once wrote. Again, to him “Ignorance and prejudice are the handmaidens of propaganda. Our mission, therefore (as the UN) is to confront ignorance with knowledge, bigotry with tolerance, and isolation with the outstretched hand of generosity. Racism can, will, and must be defeated,” he taught.

Kofi Annan actively promoted the partnership between the African Union and the United Nations. He spearheaded, together with the then African Union Commission Chairperson, Alpha Oumar Konare, the Ten-Year Capacity Building Programme for the African Union, the establishment of the Hybrid operation in Darfur – a unique model of cooperation in peacekeeping between the African Union and the United Nations, as well as a number of key initiatives.

On behalf of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, H.E. Dr. Moussa Faki Mahamat, we salute him for his immense contribution to the advancement of peace and development His dedication to humanity and diplomacy and his remarkable humility remain a shining example of servant leadership.

One could go on and on.

Let us therefore conclude with his own words, because nobody can speak truth to power more gently and more effectively than His Excellency Kofi Annan. I end again with a vintage quote from the departed Maestro:

“More than ever before in human history, we share a common destiny. We can master it only if we face it together. AND THAT, MY FRIENDS, IS WHY WE HAVE THE UNITED NATIONS.”

Rest in peace, Busumuru.

Rest in perfect peace, Kofi Atta Annan.

You made us proud to be Ghanaian, and African