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LETTERS FROM GHANA 1973-1977

by

Nini Perlov

Man continues, and will probably always continue, to try to understand the world as other people see it. Philosophers, academicians, and politicians question a people's concept of good and evil, community and individuality, hoping that this will help them to better understand particular philosophies, which in turn may better explain some particular modes of behavior. And it sometimes does. However, our cultural understanding can be at many levels and from many approaches. Therefore, the theories of the academicians, the novelist's presentation of his people, and the politicians' declaration of what is the "national sentiment" give only a partial and perhaps distorted picture of that culture.

My objective in publishing these letters from Ghana of 1973-1977 is to add another dimension to the picture of Ghana. They were written by a thirty year old Ghanaian, who presently occupies a clerical civil service post in the capital, Accra. His letters reveal a particular glimpse of Ghanaian city and village life. It would be pretentious to call his viewpoints "typically Ghanaian", yet it would be wrong to say this is the view of just one Ghanaian.

Some background of the author of the letters will be helpful in understanding them. Kodwo lives and works in Accra where he rents, from a friend, a room large enough for a bed, bureau, and wooden chair. As in most African cities, finding low cost accomodation in Accra is extremely difficult. Had Kodwo not had a friend or relative in Accra he would probably not have found any lodging at all.

Kodwo visits his mother in her forest farm settlement (a 2 hour-drive from Accra) which his father bought and cleared about thirty years ago. At his father's death Kodwo's mother and her co-wife, who never remarried, inherited the farm which they work with the help of his two young sisters and other relations. A cocoa farmer, his son, and a farm worker also live on the settlement. The compound is organized around a large central clearing which is the center of domestic activities. It is dominated by a main cooking area covered with a corrugated tin shelter. Another smaller hearth is located on the other side of the compound for the second wife and her family. Bordering the clearing are three complexes of mud houses. The animal (sheep-goats) kraals and chicken coops are directly behind the

living quarters on the fourth side of the clearing and surrounding the living area is the farm. Bananas, cocoa, plantain, corn and oranges are the principle crops. The family also has two dogs, one cat and two ducks. Many such farm settlements are scattered in the depths of this forest.

I first met Kodwo while I was in Ghana in 1972. From August 1972 through August 1973 and for two months during 1976, I would visit the farm settlement on Sundays with him. I returned to California in 1973, and we have been corresponding regularly since then.

Kodwo received up to two years of secondary school education, the equivalent of the tenth grade in the American school system, free under the Nkrumah regime. He had to leave school to find work, however, when his father died, in order to help support his family. Kodwo is very interested in Western culture and society and keeps current by reading Time magazine and any other American journal he can lay his hands on.

Sept. 18, 1973

Heii Yaa!¹

What a luck! I was about to write this, when I got your letter. It was really nice to receive your mail containing the photos. I am only showing them to my people and keep them in my album, otherwise they will get dirty within a short time.

I am visiting my mother forthcoming week's end and will convey your love to her.

Heii Calif!² Man is still in economic mess. Man is working but not making any head through. Prices are terrible with packet of sugar at 67p. Isn't it ridiculous for a lantern

*Referring to Kodwo's comments on prices, note that one Ghanaian cedi has (and has since 1972) the foreign exchange value of between 80 and 90 cents. One pesewa has the value of .8-.9 cents.

tern (kerosene-type)** to sell at 4.00 cedis? It used to be 45p some years ago. A tin of milk is 14p,³ sardines 18p etc. What a funny Ghana! You only go the stores just to find a new price fixed on them.

I received a letter recently from a friend I do not know asking me to do him a favor by searching for a shield and spear which he would like to stuff his room with. I have made several efforts to secure these things but in vain. I went to Kumasi⁴ for the shield but couldn't find it. I am worried over it, perhaps this guy will think I am not helping him. He is from Irvine. I want to be nice with all those who like me. I am still searching for it.

Tonight it is all cool. I had wanted to go to the movie but changed my mind. The crowd was too thick. I love American cowboy films - fighting, stealing, playing with the girls, gambling, etc.

Please say my sincerest greeting to your mother and monsieur Ross. The old farm-house still standing just as you saw.

Nov. 6, 1973

Heii Calif!

How goes the life with you? It's all *war* with me. Man is struggling but ends don't meet. Talking of the way of life in Ghana now, I say, I've not eaten chocolate for "4 moons" now simply we have only one type of chocolate made in Ghana and it is "Golden Tree". This chocolate is too expensive and on top of that not as sweet as those found in California. You saw the cocoa trees which my friend Mensah was working on when you went to my mother's. But Mensah perhaps hasn't tasted chocolate before. I would like it if we can manufacture our own machines to turn fresh cocoa into chocolate right from the farms. This way we can serve ourselves first and at a cheaper rate before we can ship the rest to chocolate-thirsty California where somebody will have her share. Don't laugh much Calif. I am joking.

Wow! Look at them, the Big Bosses in US. The scandal is erupting, new changes everyday.

The Middle East is worldwide. I support the Israelis whatever circumstances. Israel will in any means exist as a nation despite how lethal the Arab weapons.

**all of the quotation marks and parentheses in the text are by Kodwo.

Will write at large next telling you the ups and downs in man's life.

Feb. 7, 1974

My dear "Calif",

My Christmas was spent with my mother and everything went on in an air of bush life. We ate a lot and had a big he-goat slaughtered. The "thing" was also present both the "hot" and the "soft"...the palm wine.⁵ I had my quota peacefully. I remembered my late father because on each "occasion" he used to be with us. But some few Christmas's ago he disappeared. I poured libation for him. I hope he enjoyed it from that "last world" of his. Let me talk of the thick, sweet palm-nut⁶ soup my mother prepared during the yuletide. It was indescribably sweet, but my tiny stomach couldn't contain enough to last me a year.

Talking of palm wine above reminds me of the presence of the boozy crowd in Accra. With the three gigantic breweries in Accra beer got finished early, and boozy men and women rushed here and there holding bottles seeking more beer to buy. In a short time there was a shortage of the Ghanain popular drink, the Beer. The captivating adverts in daily papers and over the radio and even the outdoor adverts will speak for itself of the crazy beer-drinking Ghana. It was reported recently that Ghana is the third largest beer drinking nation in the world. Both men and women in Ghana drink as if they were destined to do so. The so-called Ghanain "Big Men"⁷ will leave their wives in the night and seize the fair teenage girls, and camp with them in the numerous night clubs, drinking beer. So that if you do not have money to buy beer for a fair looking baby she runs away from you, just like that. Those of us who do not have enough money to send these ladies beer drinking in the night clubs are being deprived of our young ladies by the so-called Big Men, who teach the women drinking. It's easier to win a mother of two, than a charming teenage girl. In Ghana "no money to buy beer, no attractive girl friend." Isn't it funny? Shame unto Ghana for drinking so much.

I guess your California cold is dwindling now. It's all Hammatton in Ghana and very, very dry. In the interior reports said that there is water shortage in most places, and bush fire is consuming farm properties. Peace be with you. "Let's say good-bye to Watergate. One year is enough."

May 17, 1974

Dear Yaa,

Nini, let me tell you little about my poor farm village. As I told you before my late father was a polygamist married to 3 wives. In fact the unity of marriage never existed between my father and the first wife as far back as when I was a kid. The marriage therefore couldn't be called a marriage until both of them separated from existence. My late father retired to his old farm compound where we at present have our "chocolate trees". There are also a lot of corn farms around the compound. And as I like roast or steamed corn I will just visit there regularly and without asking, select the lovely ones for my consumption. I do not have a farm myself and so I must be parasite. This is a little stealing.

July 5, 1974

Dear Yaa Manu,

Thanks a lot for your beautiful work to me. Your geographical description of Los Altos is so excellent that I can have a birds eye view of it, although I stand on an illusive hill seated in Ghana. You know it is like Suhum⁸ and Accra (Los Altos and San Francisco), where commuters flock each other everyday to do their own thing. I can guess clearly now how I could visit San Francisco from Los Altos if I were there. Your description has inspired me to know physically the beautiful Los Altos and how the 25,000 inhabitants move here and there. Do you remember my love for fruits? Your mention of apples has wetted my taste for them. In fact I love apples. Could you believe me that a little apple⁹ is sold at 50p here? I wish I were there, and I will be friends with cordial farmers in harvesting them. I do not know most of the fruits you mentioned; apricots, berries, cantalope, peaches, etc. I hear of their names, but never see them.

It's all dear at the market. I believe now the saying that the little shall be taken away from the have-nots.

It has been raining all day for many days, but fortunately dry and cool today. The moon is highly bright, so I can easily see two guys buying roast corn from a lady a few yards away. I do not know if you have such bright moon nights in the Bay Area. It will be easier for America to send a man to the moon right from here because it's so bright and traceable. America wouldn't have to chase it from Cape Kennedy if it were here...tit bits.

August 30, 1974

My dear Calif,

It's 10:25 pm and a cool breeze has forced most neighbors to sleep earlier than usual. I am writing outside despite how sleepy I am because your third of August letter is getting too late unanswered. All my thoughts reflect on you from dusk to this hour. You know why? I went to a movie at the Orion 6:15pm today. The film was an American origin. I saw some of your big cities, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, New York, etc. The people, the cars, crimes in the streets, tall buildings, American night dance, discotheques, etc. Watching all these optical illusions my mind or thoughts went there and I felt perhaps that I was in the "Americas". What a day dream!

Oh Yaa! I nearly said goodbye to the world last two weeks ago. I had stomach upset and vomitted all night and the following day. On my way home from work, that morning of the sickness, I got stranded because after vomiting when I got down from the bus I couldn't get up from the grass to hail a taxi to the hospital. I was too weak to walk or signal a taxi. My colleague was nearby but I couldn't call his attention. In short I couldn't attend duty for 5 days. I am alright now. I know I will live longer.

Yaa, your long and sound life is a great concern to my family and I, so take care as to your movements in that part called Berkeley. It's full of crimes. Do not go out much during the night, because as I hear most crimes by the drug addicts go on in the night. I pray you find a good neighborhood. We want you to live and grow old. I love America but hate the way they kill innocent and good citizens. Yaa, don't smoke too much.

Oh yes, nationally, all motor vehicles are now driving on the right side of the road instead of the left, so that if you come here you will find it easy to drive - you know how to drive now I guess.

October 28, 1974

Oh Yaa, I was at the village last Saturday and Sunday. The "golden pods" are ripe. I mean the "chocolate". I plucked some from the trees. Sooner or later you'll buy chocolate from my farm in California cheaper than I do here. The market is dealer in everything one sees. Unless space magically turns earth man will die destitute. *Twi - Mani agyina wo paa. Memame se okyia wo ne wo mame. Bo mmoden na ye adwuma na onyame behyira wo. Mekyia wo kuru ana wo mpena.* I hope you will understand the above news.¹⁰

Yaa, I do read a lot about life in U.S.A. and I remind you to please take good care of yourself now that you live alone in an apartment. Please do not stay outdoors far deep into the night, for the crazy ones are many there. Lord be with you.

December 27, 1974

My dear *Yaa Manu*,

Thank you very much for your beautiful photos. I received them this morning. They're lovely and in fact they reflect my mind on those days when you were here, except that you're now fatter.

It's true that my family depends on me in some cases but what I'm seeing now is enough. I have a hope that if I resign I could have more time to attend to looking for a better job. I admit it will be difficult if I leave this job, but I got to struggle through. Unemployment is very very high here. Worst of all is that obvious attitude of nepotism, favoritism (whom you have or know in a place etc) adopted by employers worsens the situation. Thus, we the have-nots will continue to suffer.

Secondly, I am extra glad to hear of your success in getting a desired job in the museum. I know quite well what it is when one does secure a work of the heart. I take this chance to say that you will be blessed with all kinds of good opportunities in it. In the near future you'll rise to the top post there. This will "prayerfully" materialize. I will tell my mother of it. We are all proud to hear of this. If only our prayers for you will actually work you will be Princess of something in the near future.

Nini we remember you as a dear relative each now and then and the Lord will help you in many ways. Yesterday a fellow in the village mentioned you as to when you're coming back to Africa.

The X'mas saw me in the village because I wasn't able to visit my elder mother in *Asabidie* via *Akim Oda*. The last time I saw this lady was 1967 and I got to see her one of these days. They are the only two living souls on my mother's side. She loves us dearly and I got to love her too. *Nini*, do you know we think of you as a true sister in the family?

Best regards to you and all. Take care for America is wild.

March 2, 1975

Heii Calif,

It is night in the forest farm house. Nocturnal creatures are echoing their cries through the bush. A particular one is frightening. This one is intermittent. It's like an ugly he-goat.

Today Mensah, the cocoa picker, caught a young zebra with an iron trap set up in its bush path. A big relief, because this creature has been doing great damage to my mother's farm, together with the surrounding ones. It lives mainly on leaves, thus devouring my mother's cocoyam, cassava, and plain-tain leaves. Seeing it during the day, it would run like an electric current. It is said that it runs with eyes closed. Well I do not believe this, otherwise how could it hop so fast avoiding hitting trees or obstacles. The color of the skin is white zebra crossed. I am persuading Mensah, my friend, to give me the skin or hide...but he seems to refuse. I will press for it.

The darkness here in the village is like inside a blind eye socket. It's terribly dark. Perhaps the moon which was brightly on a few days ago has worsened the visibility. It's as quiet as grave although eight o'clock. Have you ever lived in a rural village?

Please keep on with your job despite the bossy attitude of some seniors there. After all you're earning a salary and don't mind much doing their bidding. For sooner they will give way to the younger energetic and revolutionary ones. Yours is a desired job so please keep cool for "everything has its time." We normally say in Twi "*Biribiara wane mere.*"

August 30, 1975

My dear Calif,

My week-end was normally spent the way I like it, in the poor village. Wandering under the cocoa trees looking for oranges, pawpaw, coconuts, bananas, etc. I enjoy the stay here because everything is free of charge. I thank God that my late father was able to leave us a piece of land with all these kinds of fruits so that today I eat them free. An orange sells at 10 pesewas in towns. Where do I get money from now? Imagine a shirt selling at 18 cedi and trousers at 25 cedi. The current budget here has sharply increased prices to an extent that it may sound incredible to an outsider.

Feb. 4, 1976

My dear Calif,

Thank you very much for writing from France.¹¹ I think coffee is to the French as summer holidays and beef is to Americans, especially Californians. And finally coffee is to the French as beer and palm wine is to Ghanains. It is no surprise to hear of the coffee in France. I think warm coffee accelerates the French to tiptoe fast, especially the ladies, if I am right. I guess there might be a great difference between the French and Americans, especially as to their drinking habits. I imagine Americans don't spend much time on drinks. Here I will say that "drink is to the French as pot is to Californians." laugh. I have not sipped any coffee for almost 2 years now, simply because there is no sugar.

My mum and everyone greets you. Take care of yourself because there are crimes in Europe as there are in the States.

Feb. 10, 1976

Heii Calif!

It's a beautiful moon light night. It's cool. I am right now pondering over my "country's world today". It's just a world of sudden change, of high prices. Everything is dear, meat, fish, foodstuffs, candies, clothing, drinks, etc. Not forgetting that the women too are getting too expensive "on the market". Most women here now cry for more marriage than the men can contain. These women demand too much of everything, food, clothing and shelter, all under the man's amput. laugh.

Today I visited the third Ghanian International Trade Fair which opened on January first. Well, there I saw everything to my annoyance because I couldn't afford any exhibit there, cars, clothing, shoes, nice tape recorders, jewels, perfume, etc. In today's world I think we should thank our creator for rain, sunshine, moon and other free sources of our supply; or else we would just fade off the earth. If something isn't done we would sooner run from money back to the older way before money existed, to exchange of commodities.

Feb. 28, 1976

Life is as normal. It is the same with some people in the village. It is dry season now and very very dry everywhere.

Oh yes, X'mas was spent in cool atmosphere. The only thing was high price of everything. Could you believe me that

same size of chicken which sold around 2.50-3.00 cedis sold at 16.00 cedis and above? Believe me it did. If you chance to be here you will realize a big change in all you bought before. What a world today! Nini. Some shoes are costing 85. cedi.¹² For clothing the prices are just shooting like mushrooms. Former 8.00 cedi shirt is now about 20.00 cedis. To buy trousers material plus cost of sewing is another thing. Mind you, everything is inclusive.

My mother has just travelled to Akim Oda and guess she would be back by a week's time. How is everything with mother Florence? Remember my warmest greetings to her, Craig, and New Father Bill, and tell them we remember them also in our daily prayers.

March 16, 1976

Calif, one thing is that we can now buy things like sugar, milk, toothpaste, soap, babyfood, etc. from the few shops the government has authorized to sell these items. It is so because our market women have been cheating us too much; refusing to sell, hoarding, smuggling, and various trade malpractices. Government sought all means to eradicate these social ills, yet traders here were stubborn. Of late, traders sold a single torch light battery for one cedi instead of 25 pesewas. One goes to prison on contravening this decree. It's all over the country, welcome news to every Ghanain.

I have been permanent in the village for over a month and I enjoy staying there. It was all village type of living, yet I enjoy it because I have been born into it. I saw snakes, and what a big remembrance of you Calif!¹³ "They" see you and wont allow you to come closer, and off they go. But woe betide you if you step on it. The head is faster at poisoning you to death!

April 5, 1976

Yes! Last Saturday (3rd) I went for my first time outside Ghana to Lome.¹⁴ You know I've never been out of Ghana before. I went with a group. It was a very interesting trip. For the first time in 4 years I saw most of the items which are scarce in our market, sugar, sardines, milk, soap, etc. I bought some toilet soap which I never had here. In my case it was a great delight because for a long time I never saw most of the mentioned items displayed the way I saw them in Lome where everyone walks on to buy some without a struggle. Every common thing man likes is there. Lome is quite okay to me for the fact that the social life, as I imagine it, especially on the part of women, is just normal. It's not like Ghana where every woman is high-fashion minded, even though they (Ghanain women)

do not have the money to meet certain degree of the fashion. Yet they intuitively struggle on to purchase every nasty thing whatever the ascendancy of the price. Certain things don't deserve the high, high prices at which they're sold. Yet our women solicit money from the "rich Papas", normally married men, to buy what is nonsense on our part. Most women here (Ghana) feel higher when they wear expensive shoes, clothing, etc. If they can afford it themselves then it's okay, and whereas they can't it's nonsense I think. Now I will be visiting Lome when I can for a change. I have too long been in Ghana without outside visit.

May 13, 1976

Town news: Anytime I go around "downtown" seeing exhausted mothers in long queues waiting to buy certain things like sugar, soap, milk, etc. and jsst to be told later that "everything is finished" it creates a feeling in me of just what 2 years to come will bring. Prices here have unreasonably gone up of no justification. Imagine an arm chair of which its construction materials are locally produced costing 25 oedis and which previously sold at 10 oedis? The usual excuses are that the items were imported from say California, Alaska, or Greenland, etc. Wood is got just from the green forest here, yet chairs are very very expensive. Everybody takes chance of least opportunity. Imagine a society of this nature? Man's pay can not match the up-shoot of prices. People too want certain things like radios, tape recorders, cars, etc. The prices are constantly sky-rocketing like an Apollo space ship traveling to spa - or moon. To the poor, he is only yearning for a natural help by winning a jack-pot on weekly lotto, 15 football pools, horse racing, and other forms of good luck bettings, which are constant in town. Lucky ones among us win and can afford the current prices to own a few things. The unlucky fellow finds himself in an abyss of misery because he has lost all the little he has through gambling or other forms of get-rich-quick business. This is the world we live in here today.

au revoir, à bientôt.

September 21, 1976

Yaa you know it's not raining this year at all. It's all dry and my village folks just couldn't plant anything. I cannot imagine how the food problem will be next year if God doesn't have mercy on us.

November 2, 1976

My dear Calif,

I admit you have written more than I have, yet I remember my last two letters told of my survival. Perhaps you've more to write of since you live in a world of diverse creations, science, economy, people, crime, superior political referendums. What can I write of from here? Nothing other than usual shortage of commodities plus high, high prices, cars selling at 46,000 cedis, incredible.¹⁶

As usual it's the same in my village, very very dry these past years. As such, most farms were left short of maize, which was to be planted around September and August. What repercussion on our food prices next year only Gods knows. A lean harvest is always followed by famine.

The "snakeman" has so far caught or trapped 2 "mighty and devil" ones. What the snakeman caught looked like the "grandfather or mother". They were bigger than what you last saw.¹⁷

My mother and everyone are living despite my mother's sickness. Calif, best of luck to you and take care.

December 15, 1976

How is general life in the big city of yours? It's all the same here, for guess how funny, man has not used soap in bathing for 3 days now. No soap for washing clothes too. Now loaves of bread are around, yet expensive indeed.¹⁸

As usual, I will be around the village to enjoy my X'mas holidays. I decided to be in Lome but Bank of Ghana refused my application for just 15.00 cedis changed into Togo Francs. Doesn't it sound incredible?

Regards from Accra - city of mosquitos.

January 7, 1977

Hi Nini,

Thank you very much for your mail. I do not know why U.S. mails take 3 weeks and over to arrive here. Few months ago it used to be a week.

There's no major news to talk of here. It's the same as you knew. Prices are what I call "Untalkable". Each time

I hear of a price of an item I get annoyed to an extent that the only remedy is total boycott. If people can squeeze and take pains to do away with certain things (refusing to buy) due to excessive prices things could change. Yet my people are as such that they even steal to buy such shoddy goods at such cheating prices. In short, I call the whole affair of the present as "our-own-making". It's high time we learned to differentiate from acceptability and unacceptability. Few class of people here (traders) are cheating, yet we coolly keep them fat. In my own nation one sees ostentation, insincerity, callousness, etc all at its best or apogee. Wow! I shouldn't forget outlawness and injustice, where often the poor are severely dealt with and the cheap punishment awarded a "big man" on same crime.

X'mas is just gone. One marked difference was that due to disappearance and high cost of few items on market the gusto with which my people go about their normal X'mas was lost. The usual sound of hand bells in our market places were lost, for with what were they attracting customers to buy? Imagine a small sized "tinned" biscuit selling at 24.00 cedi with a de-serving price of 6.00 cedi.

I knew I did not have the money to meet all these high prices. I therefore took my mind off the usual "joy of X'mas" I never sent out gifts, no biscuits. What I heartily did was to pray for all loved ones.

On 25th morning I left for my village as I could not go through the money change to go to Lome for the holidays. If you want an enjoyable X'mas make it in the villages. Over there people are sympathetic. Go to any village and you will be welcomed with food, drink, love and all that benefits "EX'mas!" Somebody said if you want more to eat and drink reserve your belly for X'mas and see what you can eat. Well, with my mum and all relations in my village we spent the Yuletide in enjoyable mood, but in Accra I call it "hell."

No, I have no objection to your request to publish my letters. Provided it will not be deleterious and pernicious. I appreciate your interest in publishing "me" in print. I will be grateful to see some copies of such publication.

How goes the life?

Footnotes

1. My Ashanti name is yaa manu.
2. Kodwo often calls me by the nickname "Calif", short for California.

3. As of August 1976 a tin of milk had risen to 22p. There was such a shortage of sardines they were practically non-existent in the south. I never saw any, so I have no idea as to a more current price.
4. Kumasi is 169 miles from Accra, 4 1/2 hours by the fast bus.
5. Palm wine is a favorite indigenous drink. It is tapped from a certain variety of palm. When fresh, it is quite sweet or "soft", but leave it just an hour to ferment and it becomes very alcoholic "hot" or "hard".
6. Palm nuts are large red berries to be found on a different variety of palm. In order to make palm-nut soup, you crush and strain the berries, using only the oily liquid.
7. Men with money and position.
8. Suhum is an hour and a half by lorry from Accra.
9. Apples are not grown in West Africa. They are imported.
10. I miss you very much. My mother greets you and your mother. Work hard and God will bless you. I greet your husband or your boyfriend.
11. I was in Paris for the winter and spring of 1976, returning to Ghana for the summer of 1976.
12. The particular shoes he is talking about are extremely popular--imported platform sandals.
13. We saw many poisonous snakes while I was at the village. I was always very anxious to see a snake (and so Kodwo kidded me about it), until I saw the first one and realized how frightening it was.
14. Lome is the capital of Togo. It is 120 miles from Accra.
15. "Lotto" is a weekly lottery run by the government. "Football" or soccer is very popular in Ghana.
16. The Audi 100LS sells for 46,000. cedis in Ghana.
17. A three-foot long puff-ader.
18. In August 1976 a large loaf (about a foot long) cost \$1.20 cedi. There was a shortage of flour.