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Ampah, Kojo

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Transcriber: Robert Cardos

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Okay, today is October 22, 2009. We are here at Fordham University, and we're interviewing Kojo Ampah, who is the head of a new student organization at Fordham University called the African Cultural Exchange and who has a long history as a radio host, organizer of cultural festivals and educator in Ghana. So, this interview will focus both on Mr. Ampah's life in Ghana and also how he came to the United States and how he moves between the two societies and maintains connections in both. So, Mr. Ampah, welcome to the Bronx African American History Project.

Kojo Ampah (KA): Thank you very much sir.

MN: Okay, could you begin by spelling your name and giving us your date of birth.

KA: My name is Kojo Ampah, and Kojo spells like K-O-J-O, Kojo. Ampah is A-M-P-A-H. Basically "Kojo" is a mandibon male, in the Akan tradition in Ghana, and "Ampah" symbolizes truth. So "Kojo" is my soul name, and "Ampah" is my family name.

MN: Now, tell us something about your family in Ghana—you know, their traditions, where they lived, and how they influenced your growing up.

KA: I'm a Phantee from by the Southern tip of Ghana, Cape Coast to be specific. And I come from a very big family. My left father, Kofe Ampahsahara, was a Muslim, and my mother a Catholic. So, when they got married, my mother had to convert, to become a Muslim as well.

And my father always maintained a very strict compound. He always maintained four wives. In case he left one go, he makes sure he gets another one too [laughs] to take its place. Actually, I am the fifth one of my father. I come number 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, **got** the five. And on my mother's side, I'm the seventh child.

MN: And where did you go to school?

KA: I started grammar school at a Catholic school in Cape Coast, Ghana called St. Francis. St. Francis was up to class six, and we go from kindergarten to class six, and from there you have to transfer to a middle school. So St. Francis was a grammar school, and from here you go to a middle school, and together they make up the elementary school. So from St. Francis, I went to St. Augustine's **Practice**, from one—middle school from one—and middle school from two. And eventually I studied for the Common Entrance, and I gain admission to Ghana **Sna** College. It's a high school in Cape Coast, Ghana.

MN: Now, describe to us where Cape Coast is, relative to **Acrop**, for those of us who don't know the geography of the nation.

KA: Cape Coast is, like I said early on, Cape Coast is on the very Southern tip of Ghana. And it's like two hours drive from **Acrop**. It's one of the most renowned places in Ghana with regards to cultural activities and education. It's almost the seed of Ghana's—they call it the spirit of Ghana's education. We have all the best high schools in Ghana in Cape Coast. So, we have that history and geographically we—when you look at Ghana, we are the very Southern tip.

MN: Right. Now, one of the things that strikes me through my limited experience and this research, is that in Ghana the relations between Christians and Muslims are more peaceful than they are in other countries and—is that the case?

KA: That is very true. That is very true, because mostly—I would attribute that to our founder and first president, Kwame Nkrumah. Yeah, when Ghana was found as a country, he took practical steps to integrate the North and the South. The North, most of them are Muslims, and the South, they are Christians. And **Talisan** believers as well. So, Nkrumah, he sent some of the South scholars to the North to go teach over there, and he also brought some of the Northerners to come to the South to work and to learn. He even had free education for the North, because at that time there was a big gap between the North and the South with regards to western education.

MN: The South had more of it?

KA: The South had more of it.

MN: Yes.

KA: Because we had more contacts with the white, with the European. So we had more westernization, we had more of education, we have more of the **new states, the news that** call Ghana. But we are spiteful. The South has more than the North. So Nkrumah made frantic efforts to kind of bring them together.

MN: Now did your father originally come from a family from the North?

KA: Yes.

MN: So e was one of the people transplanted from the North?

KA: Yeah. My father was a medicine man. A medicine man is—they call it **Obayeh**. You, like shaman. Yeah.

MN: Not a physician, a—

Unidentified Man (UM): No, a provisional healer.

MN: Provisional healer, that's a good term.

KA: It's kind of close to Voodoo, in your language. And he came form the North. And in Ghana, those form the North are renowned. Wind comes through, **six predecessors**. So, he was such a huge influence in the Cape Coast area. There's a section called—a small town called **Aborah**, he made a very strong impact over there. He practices medicine, people came from **Abucos**, from **Bokapasu**, from Cape Coast Ghana, everyone in West Africa.

Unidentified Woman (UW): So how does he heal?

KA: They use the herbs, and also some spirituality here and there—like, they'll have some recitations here and there, and—

UM: So tradition comes from the language from the Islamic background?

KA: It's Islam blended with African. Yeah, okay. I think Islam is—they say—more accommodating to the African, because the lore of it turns like—it's close. I don't really know how he did it, but he blended the African and the Islamic beliefs together, possibly he was able to cure a lot of people. Not just healing, like, your sick, to cure. This is if you're having some problems, like for example you far at work and you're not getting any favors, you consult him and he makes sure you do good. [laughter]

UM: Promotions have some reason, you consult him, and he makes sure—

KA: Yeah.

UM: Because Islam has a bit of a mystic approach to it, and you'll blend that with the African Ghanaean, Akan culture to look into your background.

KA: Exactly. And he taught me a lot of their customs, up there The Northern customs, and the Southern customs, Akan customs. So I grew up with him, I grew up at his compound. And I got

put into the **letter lot**. I used to call libations for him. I used to go to the **boys** to get herbs for him. I learned a lot from my father.

UW: So you have the knowledge of—

MN: So you have knowledge of traditional healing practices?

KA: Yes, with the herbs, but with the mysticism I wasn't fortunate enough to learn that [laughter].

MN: You can use the herb.

KA: Pretty much, pretty much, pretty much. Basically, if you get a wound, I know the type of herb to heal you. If you have malaria, if you have like simple things like that.

UM: Snake bites.

KA: Yeah, snake bites, here and there, I can take care of that effectively.

MN: Now, there was no problem sending you to—you were growing up Muslim—to a Catholic school?

KA: There was a problem. That was a time that—when you go to school, not just a Catholic school—you would need to have an English name. You have it, or you don't get admission. So when I went to school, when I went to St. Francis, the very first day the person was raised to me. You know, they asked my name. And I said, "My name is Kojo Ampah." And they said, "No, we don't need that." I quite remember this. I was seven years old, and I still can remember that. So the principal took me, said "Okay, he's Ernest. He's Ernest Ampah."

MN: Ernest?

KA: Ernest.

MN: So, you were given the name of Ernest Ampah.

KA: I was given the name of Ernest Ampah, and it was my official name until like 2002.

MN: So that was on your government documents?

KA: On my government document, everything, I was known as Ernest Ampah until after school, after everything, and I had another job. And I realized that I don't—I'm not Ernest. [laughs] So I went to the courthouse and did an official change of name to Kojo Ampah, because that is my name.

MN: Is that a common—was yours a common experience that people were given these English names?

KA: It was—It was the system. Almost, almost—If you want to go to school, then you better have an English name. Most of them, like **Yepephu**, you know like our first president Kwame Nkrumah, he had an English name: Francis.

MN: Francis?

UM: Yeah

KA: After our, excuse me to you the word, after enlightenment like that, you go back to yourself. That's what happened to me.

MN: Now, when did you begin to get into cultural work? You know, promotion of festivals and musical evens and, you know, the recreation of cultural traditions.

KA: Well, I had a strong passion, since my infancy, for Ghana and our traditions. I think mostly—my mother and my father made sure **they inducted** that into me. I think because my father was from the North, and my mother was from the South, there was a fear—there was a fear on the part of my mother—that I would be swayed to become a Muslim as a full adult. So she made sure she taught me how to read in Akan. She used a Bible, the Akan Bible, the Akan version. She taught me how—

MN: The King James Bible?

KA: The King James Bible.

UW: Translated into Akan.

[crosstalk]

MN: What was the language spoken in the North?

KA: Wala.

MN: Wala?

KA: Wala.

MN: Wala, spelled W-A

KA: L-A

MN: L-A. So that would have been the language of your father's family.

KA: Yes.

MN: So your mother made sure you learned Akan?

KA: Yes. So she taught me how to read Akan very well. And when I went to high school, we have O-level, A-level. At the A-Level, advanced level, it was that time unpopular to do Akan, cause it was—

MN: What years were this, so we can, you know, get some—

KA: O-Level was from 1988 to 1993. Ghana **Sna** College, in Cape Coast. And A-Level was from June 93 to June 1995.

MN: Okay, so in the early/mid nineties, Akan—it was unpopular?

KA: It is still, it is even still unpopular. And it's like—I don't know you [crosstalk]. You go to school, and your colleagues are learning geography, and you tell them that you are reading Akan, they look at you funny.

UW: Why? What's the reason?

KA: Why? Because we've not been able to come out of the mental—you know, mentality that anything from Ghana's poor is no good. You know, it's still haunting us. We've not been able to

come out of that. We still look at it, like “Why are you doing this? Maybe if you settle on reading English literature.” Then as a high school boy, you be getting all the girls. “I don’t want to go do Akan. That’s a no-no.”

[crosstalk]

So at secondary school, actually I was the only Akan student at the A-Level.

UW: So the Akan language was taught in school?

KA: It was taught in school, but nobody would take it.

UW: But it’s an elective?

MN: In other words, everybody learned English, but you had to choose to learn Akan at the higher level? [crosstalk] Were there textbooks in Akan?

KA: There were textbooks, there were everything.

MN: So there were even history books in Akan?

KA: Yeah.

MN: So, you know, there's no reason why you couldn't move a curriculum into Akan.

KA: Yes. So, basically, I was the only student who took Akan as an A-Level elective. And after school, I was able to get a job with the talk radio, as an Akan news presenter.

MN: Ah. Now, did you have the experience in public speaking in school?

KA: Well, I used to organize a lot. In high school, I was a entertainment prefect.

MN: [laughs] explain what that is.

KA: Entertainment prefect is a—I coordinate entertainment events for school.

MN: *Entertainment* prefects, rather.

KA: Yeah entertainment prefect. Most of our high schools in Ghana are the boarding school system.

MN: Oh, they're—so you were living at the school?

KA: I was living at the school, and I was tied with organizing like entertainment events for this school, like for the students. So I learned a lot from that, and—

MN: Were you also the master of ceremonies? So when the entertainment came up, you would introduce it here?

KA: Yeah, I was all over the place with that. Like, I was organizing, like “when do you want to have this idea?” I was between the students and the administration, and I was in the forefront. I was talking, I was talking, I was talking.

MN: So were you considered a student radical?

KA: I had—I had some problems with—teachers call it the [crosstalk] [laughter]. I was suspended here and there, I was always running into other—I would always run into problems. I was—because one of our fights was that—we used to sneak out and go across in town. And, you know, it turned into something I invented. “We should do that.”

MN: So, you had experience when you got the job on radio, already speaking in public.

KA: Yes, I had this experience. What happened, what happened is that after high school I started a movement in Cape Coast, a youth movement in my town where I lived, Cape Coast. It was called African Heritage Organization.

MN: Ah, okay.

KA: So, we were basically trying to educate people about our African-ness. And we had different events, like to celebrate great African personalities. And you know, we were all over the place. We were coming to get strong. So we were, I think in August, August 96—yeah—we were preparing for a Marcus Gabi's Day event at the Cape Coast Town Hall. And as part of our activities we went on radio, and I was one of the speakers—to, you know, kind of sensitize the town about what we are about to do.

MN: And when you spoke, did you speak in Akan?

KA: Yeah, we did it in Akan. We did it in Akan.

MN: But was the organization conduct its business in Akan?

KA: Both in Akan and English, depending on our crowd. But we would go into the high schools, we went to the minister of education and we'll go into the high school to pick up Batala programs to, you know—Whenever we see you here—like, for say, Professor Naison is in town, or Ms. **Hippard** is in town—we'll go out preaching, but really we go speak on maybe traditional African maladies. Or something constant in Africa, or the need for self-confidence. So, we used to do that. We used to go from school to school to do that. And we're about to have a Marcus Gabi Day event, and as part of the program we went on radio, we're taking. And I was speaking some good Akan. So the manager of the station, the program's manager, called **Amamo Pekra**. He was a very old radio person. And he approached me, and "Hey, boy. I think you can do well here. I want to give you a job." I said, "Oh, you don't mean it!" [laughter] He said, "Yeah, you

got a job right now.” Actually, they were looking for someone who can read in Akan, who can translate from English to Akan and read the news. So the next day he puts me on radio. That’s about it.

MN: Now did you do the translation, like, on the spot? You read, or do you—

KA: Initially, I would read the English and start to convert it, cause I had that education, I was taught how to do that as part of the program in high school, when I used to take Akan. So initially I was doing that. And eventually I grew into it, I didn’t even need to do that. I would just wait when there’s like five minutes of time, I would pick it and as I would see it in English I’d be speaking it in Akan.

[crosstalk]

MN: That’s remarkable.

KA: So that’s what happened.

UW: And when was that, when you got the job?

KA: I think 96, 97, 98. Thereabouts. 97 thereabouts.

Interviewee: Kojo Ampah
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: 10/22/2009

MN: And what was the response from the audience? Were they—you know, did you get a lot of mail or phone calls? Or they were confused about it?

KA: I was an Akan boy, so the town fell for me. Yeah, most of the presenters were taken—this is a new radio station, by this, was springing up—So most of the presenters were taken from Akra, from different areas, you see. And I was—I think I was the only local person.

[crosstalk]

MN: Local person. Right. You were the only Cape Coast person on the station. Now how far did the station reach in terms of broadcasting?

KA: Central region. It went all over from Cape Coast to the bottom of Akra, and then some parts of Akra. And also to Western regions: Pakra, west area. They were able to listen to us.

MN: And how did you move from organizing radio to doing cultural festivals?

KA: Now, so, when I was—when I was on radio, I was still involved in my African Heritage Organization Youth Movement in Cape Coast. And I was doing pretty good. So at that time, Ghana had this idea to explore tourism for the river, the West Nile River. So the **Dani** regional minister, Kojo Yanka, started a Tourism Development Committee in that region, and I was made the first youth committee member—

MN: Of the tourism.

KA: Of the tourism in that region.

WU: When was that?

KA: This was around 98. 1998, yeah. I think 98 yeah. The dates, you know—So, I was doing that and along the line, at the end—beginning of 99, I left for college. I went to Akra to study marketing. I did a **degree in** marketing. So When I came back, that was 2001—before I even came back, I got this job at Panafest Foundation. Panafest Foundation is the organizer of the biggest multidimensional cultural festival in Africa today.

MN: How do you spell it?

KA: It's P-A-N-A-F-E-S-T.

MN: Panafest.

KA: Panafest. The Pan African Historical Festival.

MN: Wow.

KA: Yeah, it's organized on the presence of the African Union and the government of the republic of Ghana. And it's every two years a minor event. So the governor of my **Bagrand**— just after school, just after college I did a two year program in **Makatan**. It's a professional institution. So just after college the new boss at the time for Panafest, he was a different character. His name is Rabbi Kohain Halevi. He's an African American who reprobated to Africa, to Ghana, and he was made the head of Panafest. But when he first came to Ghana, I was organizing my African Liberal organization. And I once got him to go give a speech. So he had me in mind. So immediately he got a position, he goes looking for me. So I was in school and he called me, he said "Now I'm the boss of Panafest, and I want to work with you."

MN: How do you spell his name?

KA: It's Rabbi

MN: Rabbi, R-A-B-B-I, yes.

[crosstalk]

KA: Yes, even though he's a black jew.

MN: But part of the black jewish—

KA: Yes.

MN: And what's his first name?

KA: Kohan, it's K-

MN: O-H-A-N-E?

KA: K-O-H-A-I-N.

MN: I-N, Kohain.

KA: And Halevi. H-A-L-E-V-I.

MN: Okay, so it's Rabbi Kohain Halevi.

KA: Yeah, he's from Mt. Vernon, New York.

MN: Mount—wow.

KA: So he got me in there as a Makatan Assistant. And eventually I became the public relations officer. So I was more or less a liaison between the media and the organization. And I worked with them and I also dealt with, as a radio presenter for a new radio station in Takoradi, called Good News FM.

MN: Good News FM.

KA: Yeah, so, until I migrated to America in 2004, February.

MN: Right. Now, why did you decide to move to the United States?

KA: Number one: I wanted to come to school over here. There was this strong passion in me to experience what happens across the ocean, across—over here, to be educated over here. And

Two: We actually came for a Panafest event in February 2004.

MN: So you came—there's a Panafest event in the United States?

KA: In the United States, yeah. And—[crosstalk]—normally we, before any Panafest, we have branches in middle target areas, like in the UK, in America, in South Africa. Sometimes in Brazil and the Caribbean.

MN: Wow, so it's international?

KA: It's international. So we came for one of those events, and—February 2004. We actually came for Black History Month, and I decided to stay back to go to school.

MN: Now, did you have family and friends who were going to school in the United States.

KA: No family that—not family, or not even close friends—but almost always, people—like almost—the cream of the Ghanaian society, when you look at the president, you know, they all have some education outside the country.

MN: Right.

KA: So, really I'm going to expatriate to experience that end, you know.

[crosstalk] [laughter]

MN: So the transnationalism is part of this experience, especially of the elite. You grow up in Ghana, you go to school abroad and then return.

KA: Yeah, like for examples our current president, you know, he was educated in England. And, you know, the one also was—the one who contested him—he also is a registered, trained lawyer, like—so mostly, almost to get to that level, I think it's initial perception. We tend to admire people who have been to the white class land, better educated and can speak a language, and then they, you know, they'll fall for you. That's what I think, that's part of their business.

MN: Now, did you have a particular part of the United States in mind when you wanted to advance your education?

KA: I had no particularities. I just talked—I was having trouble trying to go to school. And I didn't even know that over here you need your documentations freed to get to school, you need financial aid. I didn't know about all of that. All I know is I was coming to school.

MN: Now where did you—where was your first stop on your trip to the United States, which—

KA: to the Bronx.

MN: To the Bronx?

KA: That's right.

[crosstalk]

MN: Now how did that happen? How did you end up—here you have this very successful, you know, life in Ghana as a radio personality, organizer of multiple organizations, cultural festivals, and you come to The Bronx. [crosstalk] How did you end up in the Bronx? Did you know somebody who lived in the Bronx?

KA: Yeah, I was—every Ghanaian knows somebody who lives in the Bronx [laughter].

MN: [laughs] Get that again. I think, because that's I believe a theme of our research project.

Almost every Ghanaian knows somebody who lives in the Bronx.

KA: I'm telling you.

UM: And there's a Bronx village near **Winepah**, a college town. That area has house built but men from the Bronx.

[crosstalk]

MN: They call—there's a village actually called the Bronx in Ghana?

[crosstalk]

MN: It says "to the Bronx"?

UM: Yes, "the Bronx."

[laughter]

[crosstalk]

KA: Now even that—most of the new Ghanaian movies, there's this new image that's springing up in Ghana: our movies are being patronized by Ghanis a lot. And when we have to show

anything, like someone is outside the country, or somebody's abroad, is in America. All the actors say is, "Oh, you know, I just came from the Bronx." [laughter]

MN: Do you have any of these movies?

KA: Oh yeah.

MN: Please, I'd like to read them. So we could take a clip of it and put it on the internet.

KA: Yeah

MN: Now is this—what language are the movies in?

KA: It's in Akan—Akuapem Twi actually.

MN: Akuapem Twi. Okay. And "the Bronx" is pronounced the same there?

KA: Yeah, it was—so, "I live in the Bronx, but I'm working somewhere." They will mention the Bronx. The Bronx has a very strong connection to Ghana.

MN: That is wild. So, now, did you have a particular person you were going to stay with while you were going to, you know, look around.

KA: I had a political person I was going to stay with briefly, but he bailed out to—he was supposed to come home. I didn't have in mind anyone who I was going to stay with, as I knew my **drives**.

MN: So where was your first apartment in the Bronx located.

KA: In Co-op City.

MN: In Co-op City?

KA: Yeah. [laughs]

MN: Are there many Ghaneans in Co-op City?

KA: A couple of them, yeah. There was only apartments there, you know. That's where I—

MN: So your first apartment was in Co-op City.

KA: Yes, in 120 Casals Place.

MN: How do you spell that?

KA: Casals is C-A-S-A-L-S.

MN: Ah, Casals! After Pablo Casals, the cellist.

KA: Yes.

MN: So you lived on Casals Pace in Co-op City.

KA: At 120 Casals Place.

MN: Okay. Now, did you also look for work?

KA: Yeah, at that time, you were supposed to stay there briefly, for like a week. And after a week you have to find your way—you have to—have somewhere to live. So I have this African American friend, she attended Wesleyan College and she came to a program though—they called the program **SITU**—I don't know the full name, but it was a student youth sort of organization. So they used to come over to Ghana. And she interned at my office in Cape Coast, at the Panafest office. So, yeah.

MN: So a cute **niado**, a student from Wesleyan is an intern in the Panafest office in Cape Cost?

KA: In the Panafest office, So we became very good friends, and her name is Joanna **Beladosamos**. She's from New Holland, Connecticut. So she—by then she had graduated, and she was working with a PR firm in D.C. So I emailed her: “Joanna, I'm in town and I'm looking

for a place.” She said, “Okay, come over. Come to D.C.” So she showed me how to catch a train in Manhattan and—

MN: You took the Amtrak?

KA: Yeah, she bought my ticket, a bus ticket. And she sent it to me through the internet, the information and everything. And then she added, she goes: “go to Manhattan, 34th street. A bus will come over there. Just catch the bus. I’ll get a train. I’ll be at the bus terminal.” So I did that. I took the train to Manhattan, and I caught a bus, and here I was in D.C. and Joanna was there.

So Joanna had a one bedroom apartment, and she had a boyfriend. And her boyfriend became jealous. So, it wasn’t working out that long. [laughter] Her boyfriend couldn’t understand that, he said, “No, you want to refer to me as ‘my brother’”—that’s how we, you know, we get along. So “How is my sister?” announced it, she was like, “How’s my brother?” We like brothers. Like family. So the guy was very receptive, initially. And after a week or two, he was like, “No, I don’t want this African boy in here.” Let me tell you something: they were fighting every day. But Joanna gave me—I was in the living room, and the boy, he goes in to stay with Joanna a lot. He spent most time with her at the place, so I’d be in the living room, minding my business. I was step back down, going into the pizza shops, going to—just looking for a job anyway. And, you know, the guy was getting very, very, you know, mad about that. So, I went to Joanna, “I think I gotta go.” She said, “No, don’t go. Nothing will happen. Don’t worry about that this guy.” You know, you don’t know to do from I last was in Ghana. Then he goes—I said, “No, but I don’t want to be a problem.” And actually, I didn’t have no place in mind to—I had no place in

mind as to where I was leaving to. But I was ready to leave, because it wasn't comfortable any longer. I was a nuisance. So a friend of mine, one friend who was also living with a boyfriend, he—in the Bronx—I call there one night and I say: "It's a hell. Actually, I'm leaving, planning to go back." I was leaving there already. I said my ticket was good.

MN: I just want to check the tape recorded to make sure everything's going okay, because this is a very important interview. Yes. Good. So, you're almost ready to go back?

KA: Yeah, I was giving up. Actually, it actually like—it wasn't worth it. I'm like a big nuisance at this house. I'm always trying to be like I don't exist, like as small as possible. When they are in the house, I would have to walk—

MN: We have an expression: "walking on eggshells." [laughter] You know, you're in and awkward situation [crosstalk].

KA: As far as possible, I tried to always be out of the house.

MN: Right

KA: Either I would be walking. And it was very cold. It was around February there, and I wasn't used to it. So it was hell, like I said "What has happened to me?" I had to get out of the house, and just walking and walking. And, you know, big—I was getting frustrated, so I told Barbara, a friend who was living in the Bronx, that in fact "I want to get back home, because I don't know

how you guys manage it. It's cold here. Everything is unpleasant, and I don't know what I'm doing, like—I want to go back to like—I don't think this is what I was expecting.” So Barbara said, “Oh, no problem. I will talk to my boyfriend.” Barbara used to live with her boyfriend. And there was only bedroom, by Capital Avenue in the Bronx, between 226-227th. So Barbara asked me to come. And I said okay. So the next day I said goodbye to Joanna and I got a bus and I came back to the Bronx. So, back to the Bronx and I was looking for a job, and Barbara's boyfriend was very, very cooperative. His name is **Kofe**. **Kofe** told me that if I really want to get a job, then I should look beyond the Bronx, because the Bronx is saturated. All the million jobs are taken over by Ghaneans, Mexicans, and it's very difficult to find one right now. So, go to Westchester. So I went to Bronxville. I caught a Metro North, he told me how to get there. And I went to Bronxville, and I got a job, I got my first job with a small restaurant in Bronxville, Downtown Bronxville. It's called Over the Moon.

MN: Over the Moon.

KA: Yeah, it's a small restaurant there. And I was in charge of washing the dishes. And it was hell. It was cold, and my hands were in the water all the time. There would give me some gloves. I was uncomfortable with the gloves, so I would eventually take it off and, you know, I want to do it quick and get my hands off it. But the problem with that: the moment we get done—In Ghana, if you have a job, if you are through with it, if your job in the kitchen is, like, you wash dishes, if you are through at it then you are through at it. But over here, it's different. When they hire you for the hour, they make sure you're working the hour. [laughter] So, if I say, I want to hurry up and get done washing the dishes, the moment I get finished, the owner will take me to

go cut onions. So I was going through that, and it was a very difficult situation, like, it was a very, very difficult situation. A very, very difficult situation. So—

W: So what did you do?

KA: Yeah, well, what I find is that, along the way, I met a girl, and we became friends.

W: Was she an American?

KA: No, she's from the Africas. And she also was perching, like she was sleeping with somebody. She didn't have her own place or anything like that. And I also didn't have a place where we could spend some time together. So we were talking and we're meeting along Capital Avenue somewhere, she lived two doors away from me. And there was a need for us, you know, we need to spend some time. So, with my small money that I was getting from the restaurant.

MN: Right, The Moon.

KA: Yeah [laughs] Over the Moon.

MN: Over the Moon.

KA: Yeah, I—one I planned to go around to look for a hotel to take my new girl. So, what I found is that there's a motel by 213 and Webster. I went in there to go ask for the price and

everything, to see if I can spend some time there. And when I went there, I realized that the prices are posted on the wall, like they have 3 hours, it's like 20 dollars per hour, and its [laughter]—So, I don't know, okay. So I know the prices, so I don't even need to ask how many. So let me just ask then if they're hiring. So—because I was looking for a new job. The other job was no good for me. So once I saw the prices, I went over there. I'm not even going to ask the price again. So I went to the person and asked him, "Is there any job I can do? Anything, anything?" And they said: "Do you have high school?" I said, "Oh, yes." They said, "Okay. Come back tomorrow. The boss will be around. He's opened up a new place, and he's looking for new people to man the desk." So I said, "Okay, I'm going to come." And I never went back to her again. I never heard again from her, because I wasn't going to take her to the place where I was going to work. [laughter] So that was it. I didn't see her again. I didn't go to her again, and I was only praying to go to the place the next day to go meet the new boss and to look at my chances. So I went in there looking for employment. He said, "Okay, I'm able to give you something, but you start as security." I said, "Okay. I like it, I'm going to take it." So, security, I got a job as a security guard, and I was start working. It would get busy in the night, so I'd start working somewhere around eight o'clock, deep into the night—like, five o'clock.

UW: In the morning?

KA: in the morning. In the morning. And I did that for a while, and eventually he took me to a desk when he started a new one by 231st **Five Place** Route, the **Bedford** section of the Bronx.

MN: Right.

KA: And I worked that too, and eventually I would apply to university. And I quite remember when I first got here for my interview at admissions process, the one in charge asked me, “Where do you work at?” I said, “I work at the motel.” And he said, “Do you want to come to Fordham?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Okay. Well, how you going to pay?” I said, “Oh, uh. I will find a way. I will try, like—” He goes, “Okay.” So, you know, I didn’t even know that I **heard from him** is like up. This obstacle is high school is like, but—Also, then, I just wanted to go to school.

UW: So when did you apply to Fordham?

KA: Just, I think, just last year.

MN: And were you still working at the—

[END OF SIDE ONE]

[START OF SIDE TWO]

KA: I also worked at the motel. I also worked at the motel. I quit beginning of 2009. But I set up for them this 9th, 8th of September Fall.

UM: Two Weeks.

MN: So what led you to form this student organization?

KA: So, you know, one of the first things that I'm **impressing is the need** for Fordham admissions was that—you have clubs here, who—how do I blend in to Fordham? Because who am I like? [crosstalk] Like this club, I've been doing that. They said, "Oh yes, you can join this club, or this club, this club." So I know—it took me like a year, and I realized I was—I started contacting Africans on campus, like whenever I'd see you, I'll approach you. And I realized that Fordham is a huge school and most of the students are affluent white kids, and most of the Africans I see here, we get intimidated. You see us working **under the trees**, going our own way like—pardon me—like we don't exist. So to kind of fight that, to kind of go, to kind of get us to feel like we are also students here and we pay fees like any other person, and this is our school too, I—that's how I was approaching the members. You know, like, I say, "come on. Like, this is our school. Like, we're also here and we pay certain fees, and everything. Let's feel like we belong here." So I mobilized them on that thing and we—

MN: And you have undergraduates and graduates.

KA: undergraduates and graduate students. undergraduates and graduate students.

MN: Now at the time you've been living—are you still around Carpenter Avenue?

KA: No. I moved eventually. Carpenter Avenue, I moved, I moved after, you know, I was making some money here and there. So I was able to rent a place. First I moved down to 178 and Webster. I moved down to 178th and Webster. And it was a little bit chaotic. [laughs]

MN: Yeah, I know that neighborhood. Webster is very chaotic.

KA: Right, so I moved to Baychester, Baychester Avenue and **West 178**. And just about month ago I moved again. Now I live in the Fordham hills.

MN: In the Fordham Hills housing? That's a very nice place.

KA: Yeah, that's where I live right now.

MN: Now, in your time living in the Bronx, did you meet many other Ghanians who were living the neighborhoods you lived in?

KA: Along—When I used to live in Webster, you always meet Ghanians. Like it's, when you get there, you just have to get out. You just have to get out of the apartment and you meet a Ghanian. But Baychester, you didn't—

MN: It's more West Indian?

KA: Yeah, it's more West Indian, like, Caribbeans and—

MN: So, how did you maintain your contact with the culture? Did you go back?

KA: Yes, I've been back twice since I've been here. And I'm also a member of this not for profit organization called the Friends of Ghana. Friends of Ghana. Actually, Friends of Ghana. It's based here.

MN: It's based here?

KA: It's based in Mt. Vernon.

MN: In Mount Vernon? Called Friends of Ghana.

KA: Friends of Ghana. Actually, I'm the Vice President for that organization.

MN: Okay.

KA: And through that I used to meet Ghanians. Like, we organize like families and we collect items, we—like computers and stuff, and we send it back to Ghana. We—last year we sent a lot of computers, dialysis machines, eight of them, to a hospital in **Kolebo**, and **Nakua**. And we even, as I speak, we organizing to ship, to make a shipment come December. We have some computers, some equipment to send.

MN: Now, are you expected to send things back to your family?

KA: Yeah, it's part of it. [laughs] It's part of it. [crosstalk].

MN: Now, if you're expected to—

KA: Yeah, they look at you like, “while you are in America, then you have to support them.” It's **the hardest way to work**. And they don't even consider funding—they don't consider the funding. I'm a student here. I have to pay bills, or—it doesn't come in. You have to support them. And in my case it's even worse because back in Ghana I was doing pretty good, and I was able to support my nephews and my nieces and everybody—and my sisters. I was able to support them and everything. So my case is even made worse, because now I'm in America. If I was in Ghana and I was, you know, able to help out, then in America—in America you really have to take care of things. So I've had problems with my immediate family because of that, like, they don't understand me. I remember recently when I went over—I went back home like about two months ago. They were disappointed because I couldn't give them money like that. Like, I didn't have it. I didn't have it. They're like, “come on. What are you telling me? You come home and you don't got any money?” I didn't know, I said “Well, I don't have money. My rent is in suspension. You know, I have to pay car insurance. I even know have credit card bills to pay.” Like, I don't have money right now. I'm even going to school.

UM: Your money, what else do they expect from you?

KA: Oh, they expect clothes, like thick cloth. Like, the, I don't know, the wax—

UM: Wax prints,

[crosstalk]

KA: Wax prints. So when you're going, for example, I'd do fourteen of them.

UM: fourteen?

KA: Yeah, fourteen.

MN: Fourteen wax prints?

KA: Yeah. [crosstalk]

MN: So they're very—this is something? Wax prints?

UM: You haven't seen those before? They are cotton, but they are made in Holland.

UW: But they're full African wax.

UM: They're made in Holland. They use our patterns and motifs.

[crosstalk]

UM: And to be able to present two or three pieces to your mother is like the best thing you could ever do for her.

MN: Wow.

UM: So for the three pieces, she can make 6-8 clothes out of.

MN: So it's what people used to sew with and create clothes with?

UM: Yes.

MN: So you brought fourteen.

KA: I brought, my last visit I took fourteen, because I have a big family. Remember, I'm the fifth.

[crosstalk]

KA: And I have a lot of mothers.

[crosstalk]

UW: Four mothers.

KA: Yeah, I have—I have even more than that. My father maintained four wives, but he had more than four—like, children—[crosstalk] so I had to make sure at least my aunties, my mother at least would get one. But out of the fourteen cloak, my mother only got two of them. Because everyone expected one. Just—[crosstalk] “Oh, Kojo is in town.” So you have to go to officially greet them, talk to them, and present what you brought. You can’t go and say [crosstalk]

UM: You have to go and present the cash and the good. Every time.

[crosstalk]

KA: So now when I went without the cash, I just presented the wax prints.

MN: right.

KA: Yeah, they like it, for it has a special meaning in their mindsets. It has some prize. So, they like it, but they will still—

MN: Gotta have the cash too. [crosstalk]

KA: So when I coming back, I didn't even say goodbye to anybody [laughter].

UM: [laughs] I wouldn't.

KA: You have to plan. I went to Arka, and they knew I was going to come back, and before I realized, I was calling from here: "Oh, I got back to New York." "Oh, you're already back? We were expecting you to come and say goodbye to us." And I said "Oh—I couldn't—" So I had to leave.

MN: Now, have you been able, since you've come, to organize the kind of cultural festivals that you organized in Ghana?

KA: No, not a cultural festival, not a cultural festival. But I've been involved with Ghanaian events here, like our picnics and stuff like that.

MN: So you have that, you have—what are these social events and cultural events that you're involved with here with the Ghana Society?

KA: Well, our organization, Friends of Ghana—

MN: Yeah

KA: —at the end of every year we throw like a party—like a get together—for Ghanians and Ghanian leaders here in the Bronx, specifically like we try to get them together. So that's about the only Ghanian, like sort of event culturally that I organize.

MN: Now, where does this event take place? Is it outdoors, or in a big hall?

KA: Outdoors in Mt. Vernon.

MN: In Mount Vernon? Is it far?

KA: It's down about—at the **Bill Center** in Mount Vernon. It's a small community center, and also the president of Friends of Ghana, Joseph Johnson, his house, he has a very big backyard.

MN: Oh, so you can have it there as well.

KA: Yeah, so that's where we normally—

MN: But with your experience, it seems we should have a cultural festival at Fordham.

KA: That is what we plan to do. That's what we plan to do, and it's going to be mega.

MN: Good.

KA: It's going to be, no—

W: We can coordinate with you.

MN: We'll work with you on this.

KA: Yes, it's going to be a great—that's what we planned to do, like we hoping to launch our organization next semester. And then if we settle a budget and we will have many events on campus.

MN: Yeah, and we have connections with the Francophone African Hip-Hop people in Paris with Paribas Zerou. So we can, you know, bring some of the top people, like Mokobe and, you know, that there's enough money for this, but—

KA: Yeah, we will be able to group. And now, one interesting thing is this: one of interests in Africa—you know, like Africanness, or—is that the market is good. You see, Delta flies to Akra from New York. And then you will see—

MN: There's a direct flight to Akra?

KA: That's right. You see on buses, driving around the Bronx, you see like: Akra to Ghana, Akra to—New York to Akra. So I think we can even look beyond the walls of Fordham for sponsorship for some of these events.

MN: Oh wow.

KA: And that's what I'm thinking about, like I have this experience to work—

MN: Well, we will—we'll work with you on this. And also, if we're getting a chance to write this **carbonmirand** we can have a cultural festival written in the plan. Which is one of the reasons I think we should try to have you as replacing Amy before as the student assistant on the project. So, next week we'll talk and have you fill out all the papers to do that. So, well this is very exciting [laughter] and I know Dr. Edward has to get to class, and—are there any things that you want to say—remember all of this is going to be in the public record—about your experiences, or things you—people should know?

KA: Number one: I think, on a personal note, I am hoping in the very near future, that I am able to go back to Ghana. I plan to go back to Ghana very soon, like after school and everything. I will be talking about immigration, like unplanned immigration. When you want to travel to America, you have to be aware of the situation. Like, you have to know what you're going to meet. You don't have to just take your bag and say you're coming to America. It's more than what we know and I think that the need for education on the other side.

MN: To let people know what they're up against.

KA: Yeah, and a—

MN: Like with Johnson **Motib**, we did an interview with somebody who was like exploited, threatened, mugged, very bad things happened to him before he finally—

KA: I guess, I just did—I just wrote poem on that topic. I write poems. In my spare time I write poems. And I just did a poem on that. It's called "**Cofisica**."

MN: Now, can you perform it for us?

KA: Okay, I don't mind.

MN: Okay sure, go ahead.

KA: Okay, this poem is called "**Cofisica**," and it goes like this:

Oh, **Cofisica**,

is it true that you've substituted foo-foo for burgers?

Oh, **Cofisica**,

is it true that you sleep in morgue half of the time?

Oh, **Cofisica**,

it's a shame, across the ocean,

so says Abintu.

Cofisica,

it's another day.

Your pears are selling
and this drawing and jokes
foreign to strangers.

Cofisica,

the other day

I saw Sarah in the arms of **Atenda** at the riverside.

Is there anything more important than your humble Sarah?

It's a mess, across the ocean,

so says **Abintu**.

Cofisica,

Abintu recalls that, at your place,

Men spend time at a kitchen,

While some men prefer trellace.

It's a shame, across the ocean.

Cofi,

The Ancestral Cornerstool awaits you.

And it can't be true

That there is anything that you prefer

over the pride of the Ancestral **Cornerstool**.

That goes it, friends.

MN: That was stupendous.

UM: That's very emotional. I'd like to speak to just two things you mentioned. You mentioned that Cofi has exchanged Foo-foo for Burgers.

MN: For Burgers.

UM: Foo-foo is our dish, like in Abintu we talk about [crosstalk] And you, having been there overseas, means so much. But he's saying that, the Bintu *say* this. But it's not true. I even saw your girlfriend sleeping out in the morgues. The last part says the Ancestral Cornerstool is awaiting you, miss you, Ancestral Cornerstool. You know that's a common experience to come here, and to be just normal people. This young man is highly respected by me, who told me about his life. Very few professors can get that message, to date—

MN: It'll be our next interview.

UM: He has an ancestral job waiting for him, looking for a job now. How could you have burger and an ancestral coli strewn in the corner for pictures of royal? [crosstalk] How could you get that honor, respect and dignity and then get to Bronx and live in **muster** and [crosstalk].

MN: And wash dishes and cut onions.

UM: Cut onions, you can't even find a place your girlfriend. [crosstalk] "Oh my girl is gone. I have no place for the two of us." So it is very heavy, this thing that: if you have to come, you have to do some homework. Although eventually it works out for us.

KA: Yeah [laughs].

UM: College education, Fordham. Not City College. Fordham. Masters, Doctorate, whatever. You can go back and be somebody else.

MN: But be prepared—

UM: for all the struggles that you—

MN: for trouble, difficulty and struggle and loneliness.

UM: That's right.

MN: And loneliness.

MN: That's a given.

KA: And sometimes I've prayed that—I would like to get my—to have a collection of poems, to have a lot of poems. And eventually when the time is right, when you can help me—

MN: Oh, of course.

KA: I've been writing poems for about the past 15 years.

MN: You should—one of the things is: you should have a poetry event. This is very big at Fordham University, spoken word. Because it connects to the hip-hop, and there are open mic nights where you can perform your poems.

KA: Yes.

MN: And let me connect you with Trolly Johnson—he's our grad—a former student of ours who still works with us. He's a DJ and also a filmmaker. He organizes open mic nights. I'm going to put him in touch with you about you performing your poetry at open mic nights at Fordham, because—

UW: Actually my son did that in **New Consent**.

MN: I didn't realize he was also a poet as well as an artist?

W: Yeah, yeah. And he was telling me, he was so happy. He's a freshman at **New Consent**.

MN: Yeah, look at it. You should definitely perform. And I know there's a very important open mic night November 17, when a whole group of people from Berlin is coming. We—our project has a collaboration with social workers in Berlin who bring young people who have gotten in trouble, you know, and many of them children of immigrants, and they get them involved with this hip-hop project where they can't, you know, promote violence, they can't promote misogyny. But, as long as they're poetic, they—and so, they're coming, and they're going to perform at an open mic night. It would be wonderful to have you also perform some poems.

KA: That would be wonderful. That would be—I would be—

MN: And you'll meet the poets. I'm going to put you in touch with some of the people who do poetry at Fordham so you can start communicating with them. Because it's—That's a very big thing already and so, you know, we'll do all of this.

Now you also said you're a storyteller?

KA: Yes.

MN: And do you go to schools and do this?

KA: Yes, back home. Back home we used to go to schools, whenever they would have event, whenever they would have Panafest events or any of my events my organization does personally.

MN: Would you be willing to go to a school here?

KA: I would—

MN: Okay, I am going to put you in touch with a new principal who my wife mentored. My wife is an elementary school principal in Brooklyn, and she mentors younger principals. One of the young women is a school at 164th street and Morris Avenue right near the Bronx Museum. There are many African children in the school. When we come back to my office, I'm going to give you her contact information. I'm going to also write her about you, that you're a storyteller in the African tradition and might be willing to come to the school.

KA: That would be wonderful.

MN: And, you know, so we'll—this is the beginning. So next week we'll talk about you coming in and getting you as an official member of the project as a student worker on the Carnegie Grant. But, you know, we're very proud to have you as part of our team.

KA: Thank you very much, and I'm very excited, and I'm looking forward to the community.

MN: And is Kareem—yes. We will have you in, in a couple of weeks, for another interview. There's clearly a whole story here that's worth telling. Now, so, is there anything else you'd like to say?

KA: Not really [laughs].

UM: I have something I just want to ask. A question. Since you've been around here, you've heard that the president went to Ghana. Do you think the Ghanaian government or the **Ihriri Bentu**, the leadership there, the people that the chief puts in front—should we find a way to use that trip as a catalyst to developing our country? Not even our country, but developing the culture of our people in that area?

KA: I think that—

UM: Can we build a bridge between his visit, Michelle's visit with the Ghanians, and kind of start something exciting that we can continue: culture, education, whatever—anything that we can use, like we can use this as a usable event, and just go over there like that. The President of America not going to Kenya, but coming to Ghana because of the Wife's links with Ghana. How can we Ghanians here use the opportunity to promote our country in America?

KA: I think it's a very wonderful—it's a nice question. And when President Obama went to Ghana he went to Cape Coast, that's my town.

MN: Oh, he was in your town?

KA: Yeah, and he went to meet him at the Palace, at the palace of our chief. He's very close to the **dungeon**. So he wrote an official invitation to our chief to even come over to the White

House to come meet him. And we're expecting him. And maybe we'll go together to the White House, come the end of November.

UW: The White House? [laughter]

[crosstalk]

MN: I actually have a friend who was one of the first people to raise money for Barack Obama when he was running for the senate who was invited to swim at the White House.

UM: To swim at the White House?

MN: Yeah, this is a—he's a [laughter]—no, there's this African American gentleman who I met through playing—I'm a former competitive Tennis player. I used to be captain of my college team.

KA: I remember my tennis racket—[crosstalk]

MN: And my daughter was a champion player and so we both played with him. And they vacationed in the same area we do. But he became very wealthy in Wall Street, this gentleman, George Haywood. And when Barack Obama was running for senate, a professor of his at Harvard Law School said you should meet this—I guess we can turn this off. Yeah, we don't need—

Interviewee: Kojo Ampah
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: 10/22/2009

[END OF SIDE 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]