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JOHN F. KENNEDY & AIRLIFT STUDENTS - 1960

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Kenya Kipande Golf in Nyeri



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STUDENT AIRLIFT TO AMERICA EDUCATES KENYA'S NATION BUILDERS

by Kari Mutu

*African students touring New York City with
the Statue of Liberty in the background.
(Photo courtesy Cora Weiss)*



1960s Fireworks, singing and dancing filled the air on the night of 12 December 1963 when Kenya gained independence from Britain. Yet for thousands of young Kenyans who took over the reins of governance, a successful handover would have been impossible without the benefit of a post-secondary education. Against all odds, several hundred young Kenyans had entered American universities in the early 1960s in what became known as the African students airlift to America.

During the colonial period, there were limited opportunities for Africans to pursue higher education, not least because white settlers and missionaries were not inclined to support their academic advancement. In his recent memoirs, **Kitchen Toto to Ambassador**, retired Ambassador Philip Gitonga writes that, "African Christians did not need further education. They only needed to know how to read the Bible and become good artisans and clerks."

A small number of institutions offered diploma courses to Africans, while a handful of Kenyans managed to enter universities in Britain, South Africa and India at a time when even getting a passport was a tremendous hurdle.

Only the topmost Kenyan students made it to Makerere University College in Uganda. "So the next of us in the ranks were finished. You became a teacher or policeman, you were employed by the railways or post office," says historian, Mutu Gethoi.

The airlift to America was the brainchild of nationalist and future cabinet minister, the late Tom Mboya who worked as a sanitary inspector in the British-administered Nairobi City



African students arriving in America on a plane from Seven Seas Airlines. (Photo courtesy Cora Weiss)

Council. Mboya was educated, articulate, astute and an active member of the local workers' union from where he later gained political prominence.

In 1955 Mboya spent a year at Ruskin College in Oxford, England on a British Labour Party education grant. Returning to Kenya he tried getting similar grants for other aspiring African leaders. But the colonial government was unreceptive, more occupied with quelling the Mau Mau independence struggle. So Mboya turned west, to America.

Cora Weiss, now 81, a human rights and peace activist from New York City, remembers the genesis of the airlift programme. From 1959-1963 Ms Weiss was the executive director of the African American Students Foundation (AASF), the body that handled the American side of the airlifts.

"It was the era of anti-colonialism, decolonisation, liberation movements and that's where the action was in terms of international human rights and civil rights," explains Ms Weiss. Her social justice activism comes from experiences of anti-Semitism she suffered as a child raised in a primarily Christian section in New York State.

Cora's husband, Peter Weiss, was a founding member of the American Committee on Africa (ACOA), an organisation that lobbied against colonialism and for African liberation movements. At the invitation of ACOA, Mboya went on a speaking tour in North America in 1959 to get education scholarships. He was only 28 years old at the time, but his visit attracted the attention of prominent African American personalities such as civil rights leader Dr Martin



Cora Weiss (left) and Tom Mboya (centre) lobby for funds to allow Kenyan students to come to the United States for university degrees. (Photo courtesy Cora Weiss)



Tom Mboya meets Senator John F Kennedy, whose Kennedy Foundation sponsored the 1960 airlift to the tune of \$100,000. Political analysts say this move gave Kennedy the African American vote, allowing him to be elected as President of the United States later that year.



Homer Jack of the American Committee on Africa (ACOA) and Cora Weiss help a Kenyan student fill out forms to study in the United States. (Photo courtesy Cora Weiss)



Bill Scheinman, American philanthropist, hands a ticket to a Kenyan student ready to head to the United States for university studies. (Photo courtesy Cora Weiss)

Luther King, musician Harry Belafonte, sportsman Jackie Robinson, actor Sydney Poitier, and Mrs Ralph Bunche, wife of the first African American recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize (1950).

The American civil rights movement had little connection to the African liberation struggle. However, Belafonte, Robinson, Poitier, and others in the AASF were a few of the Americans who, as Belafonte stated, "Understood that in post-colonial, independent Africa, without education there could be no government, no democracy, and no justice."

Prior to 1959, Mboya had received education funds from Bill Scheinman, a millionaire philanthropist he had met on a previous labour union trip to the USA. "Scheinman's accountant told him that he should start a foundation so that he could deduct his grants to Tom, as tax deductions," says Ms Weiss. This marked the founding of the AASF by Scheinman, Belafonte, Robinson, Poitier, Ms Weiss, political activist Frank Montero and renowned labour lawyer Ted Kheel.

Back in Kenya, Mboya connected with Dr Julius Kiano, the first Kenyan to earn a PhD, and politician Kariuki Njiri, both of whom were graduates of American universities. Together they began identifying suitable candidates for the airlifts. Kenyan students thirsty for higher education soon got wind of the Mboya-Kiano-Njiri education initiative. Ms Weiss flew to Kenya on several occasions to assist with applications. Retired economics lecturer and airlift beneficiary, Professor Joseph Maitha, remembers that Ms Ernestine Hammond Kiano and Mrs Ruth Stutts Njiri also helped with student processing.

Ms Miriam Chege had just been accepted into the King George Hospital (now Kenyatta National Hospital) for State Registered Nurse studies when she heard about the airlifts through the Nyeri Catholic Diocese. Lucy Kiilu was an untrained teacher when her former schoolmate and fellow airlift beneficiary, Regina Ndibo, told her about the programme. When Mutu Gethoi, then a school teacher in Nyeri, discovered that the headmaster had resigned to pursue further studies in America, he followed a year later, first joining the *East African Standard* newspaper in Nairobi in order to be near the airlift offices.

Meantime, there was a political war of words between the American and British gov-

ernments. "Even though the Lancaster House talks [for African independence] were going on, London didn't want Washington to meddle in one of their countries," explains Ms Weiss.

Professor Frederick Okatcha, former sociology lecturer at the University of Nairobi, recalls, "The local British were spreading propaganda that American education was not good." Indeed, a subtle rivalry arose between American and British trained Kenyans that continued for many years.

"The Makerere and the London-trained, didn't like us very much because they thought we were too proud. We couldn't care for the British," says Mutu Gethoi, who graduated from the University of Michigan.

Notwithstanding, Kenyan students applied to American universities. Some received full scholarships, others got partial grants and had to source for additional funds from family and friends. "The only thing they (the airlift committee) guaranteed you was the fare, one way," said Prof Maitha who graduated from the State University of New York.

Ms Chege was required to get an additional sum of Ksh 300 from her local council. It was a lot of money at the time and only through the intervention of the district officer, John Nottingham, were the funds obtained. "He was so helpful and was involved in making sure that whatever needed to be done was done so that we go to the US," said Ms Chege.

Prof Okatcha received grants from the AASF, the African American Institute and the Philip Stokes Fund and graduated with a doctorate from the University of Michigan.

81 Kenyan students, including 13 women, were on the first chartered aircraft that arrived in New York City on 11 September 1959 destined for universities in American and Canada.

Ms Weiss remembers, "Most of the students had never been on an airplane, had never left Kenya. They had no idea what they were getting into. But they were brave and adventurous and highly motivated."

A well-known student that year was Barack Obama senior, father of former US President Barack Obama, who joined the University of Hawaii. Obama senior was not an airlift student, but he benefited from American support for African students and obtained funds from different sources including the AASF.

For the 1960-1961 academic year, AASF secured another 250 scholarships, but getting

money for air transport was proving difficult. Several requests to the US State Department and Vice President Richard Nixon's office had been unsuccessful.

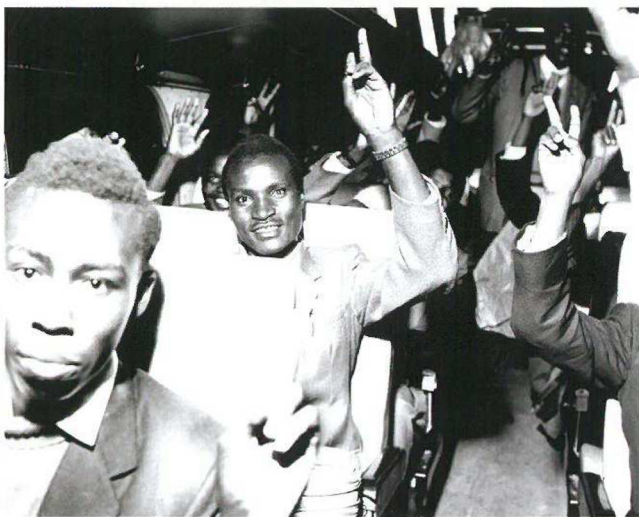
So Mboya returned to the USA in July 1960 where he, Scheinman and Montero met with Senator John F Kennedy of the Democratic Party. Kennedy chaired the Senate Subcommittee on Africa and was a keen supporter of the African liberation movement. The outcome was that the Kennedy Foundation sponsored the 1960 airlift to the tune of \$100,000.

Almost immediately, an outcry arose from the Republican Party that interpreted the Kennedy sponsorship as a political move to attract African American voters in the upcoming presidential elections. "I maintain, and others do too, it became one of the contributing factors to John F Kennedy's election," said Ms Weiss, a Democrat. "This was the swing vote that put Kennedy ahead."

In September 1960, the second batch of African students travelled to America. Kenyans were the majority but there were also students from Tanganyika, Uganda, Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland (present day Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi). One of the passengers was the late Professor Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Laureate.

The students flew on a Seven Seas propeller aircraft operated by BOAC. The journey of several days made stops in Uganda, Sudan, Libya, the Netherlands, Germany, and Iceland before flying across the Atlantic Ocean to Canada and then the USA.

Okatcha, Mutu, Ms Kiilu and Ms Chege



Happy Kenyan students on board a plane to the United States, giving the V symbol for Uhuru – Independence. (Photo courtesy Cora Weiss)



Baseball legend Jackie Robinson, the first African American player to break the colour bar and play in the major league for the Brooklyn Dodgers, addresses a group of African students after they arrived in New York. (Photo courtesy Cora Weiss)



Civil rights activists Frank Montero (left) and Jackie Robinson (centre) greet an African student. (Photo courtesy Cora Weiss)

boarded the last of the three planes to depart Nairobi. All of them remember a frightful incident that occurred over the Atlantic Ocean. "We took off in the early morning and then after an hour or so, one engine failed. We were in trouble," recalls Mutu. The pilot announced that the plane had developed problems and needed to return. "We thought we were going to perish," said Ms Kiilu with a laugh.

The airplane managed to land at a military base in Iceland where repairs were carried out. The flight resumed the following day, "but two or three students refused to go," says Mutu. "The army was called [from] next door and they just shoved them into the aircraft like *ngunias* (sacks)."

The students arrived in New York City and stayed at the New Yorker Hotel for a short period of orientation that included city tours, welcome parties and lectures on the socio-cultural aspects of America. They were awed by novelties such as television, hot dogs and white waiters in restaurants. "They met Jackie Robinson, Malcom X, and many wonderful Americans who helped brief them on what they could expect," says Weiss. Afterwards, each person departed by bus or train to universities across the country. Most never met again until they returned to their home countries.

For African students living in American during the height of the civil rights movement, racial experiences differed greatly, depending if they lived in the northern or southern states. At Skidmore College in the state of New York, Ms Ndibo and Ms Kiilu were two of only four black students. They did not face racial discrimination but remember that white students

were very curious to know about African students. "They asked very stupid questions like, how did you get here? How do you feel wearing these western clothes?" said Ms Kiilu.

Ms Chege found that white people in the mid-western state of Indiana were more positive and welcoming towards Africans than towards African-Americans. Every holiday she had invitations to the homes of her classmates, "I guess because they really wanted to show their families an African friend," she concludes.

Prof Maitha, on the other hand, recalls the segregated public facilities in the southern state of Arkansas. "The restaurants were marked, 'Whites Only' and 'Coloured.' The water fountains were equally marked like that," said Maitha.

Surprisingly, quite a number of African students received scholarships to southern state schools where racial segregation was deepest. A few Christian white schools in the south, which would not take African Americans, took in Africans because they wanted to show they had foreign students. However, they treated the Africans terribly. Ms Weiss surmises that African students in the southern schools eventually relocated. "I think all of them managed to graduate from better schools in the north."

Many airlift students were pioneers at their schools. Prof Okatcha was the first African student at the University of Central Missouri, which drew the interest of the media in the town of Warrensburg. "You could see the curiosity on the campus. I was being interviewed and in the newspaper. It said, 'First African Student Arrives.'"

As an English Literature student, Ms Kiilu found that her level of education was superior

to that of her American classmates. "In class, we would do better than they would. They were shocked at how you can do better in English."

African students were required to raise their own pocket money. "Mboya and Scheinman were adamant that this must be a self-help enterprise and to satisfy US visa requirements, each [student] had to raise \$300," says Ms Weiss. With an exchange rate of seven shillings to the dollar, KES 21,000/- was a huge sum for most African families. Consequently, students found casual jobs during the long summer holiday. Prof Maitha worked at a jewellery box factory in upstate New York. Ms Chege washed dishes in a hospital catering department. Mutu Gethoi says he moonlighted anywhere, including selling ice-cream on a bicycle.

Most African students could not afford to travel home for the holidays so the AASF established a system of connecting students to American foster families. Ms Weiss hosted Regina Ndibo and welcomed many others to her home for student counsel or homely comforts.

As the time came for the students to graduate, their home countries were keen for their return. After completing their bachelor programmes, some students stayed on to pursue

Masters and Doctorate courses that were not available in East Africa. A few settled permanently in America but an estimated 95% returned home, where they were eagerly awaited to help build the nation.

Ms Kiilu was enlisted by a British civil servant, a remnant of the colonial administration. "He would come and recruit prospective civil servants." Prof Maitha had several job offers in America including from his own university. "But I felt that I was wanted at home," he said.

Prof Okatcha was recruited by the University College of Nairobi before completing his studies. Immediately after submitting his doctorate thesis in 1968, he obtained permission to miss the graduation ceremony and returned to Nairobi. He checked into the Norfolk Hotel, which was situated opposite the university, previously a whites-only establishment. Patronising of hotels by Africans was one of the liberties that had come with independence.

The airlift programme ended in 1963 but by this time, more schools and universities had opened up in East Africa. Ironically, three icons of the airlift programme were assassinated within a decade of the airlift: John F Kennedy died 1963, Martin Luther King in 1968 and Tom Mboya in 1969.



Students and their hosts dancing at a reception for the African students in the United States. (Photo courtesy Cora Weiss)

Almost 800 students passed through this education programme and together they formed a pool of skilled Africans ready to move their newly independent countries to the next level of development. Universities, the civil service, health and agricultural were some of the biggest recipients of returnees.

After a brief stint as head of nutrition with the Catholic Relief Services in Kenya, Ms Chege joined the Nairobi City Council where she pioneered maternal-child healthcare programmes at family health centres across the city.

Ambassador Gitonga earned his degree from Barrington College and became a provincial administrator. He then spent 10 years in the diplomatic service and another decade as the elected MP for Lari constituency.

Prof Okatcha retired from the University of Nairobi in 2013 after more than 45 years of service. Also at the University College of Nairobi, Prof Maitha became chairman of the Economics department in 1969. He and other American-educated alumni revamped the syllabus and introduced post-graduate studies. "The majority of my classmates who went to Makerere and England only had Bachelor's degree, so the university was revolutionised by American-educated people."

At a civil rights rally in Washington DC in 1959, Mboya described the African freedom struggle as, "Nothing less and nothing more than the eradication of poverty, disease and ignorance."

The African student airlift to America by Mboya, Njiiri and Dr Kiano was an ingenious strategy to capitalise on education opportunities outside the British empire, which underpinned the successful transfer of political and administrative governance from Britain to Kenya.



Cora Weiss now 81, a human rights and peace activist from New York city, was the executive director of the African American Students Foundation (AASF), from 1959-1963. (Photo courtesy Cora Weiss)



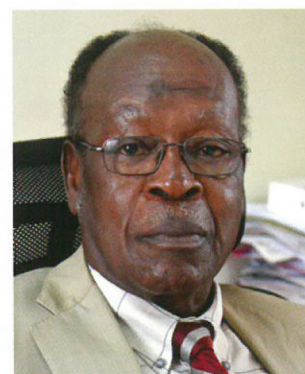
Ms Lucy Kiilu, who studied English Literature at Skidmore College, was recruited to come back to Kenya as a civil servant. (Photo courtesy Kari Mutu)



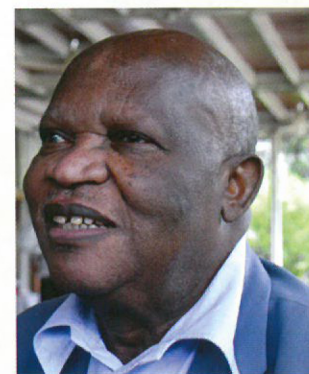
After her studies in the US, Ms Miriam Chege joined the Nairobi City Council where she pioneered maternal-child healthcare programmes at family health centres across the city. (Photo courtesy Kari Mutu)



Historian Mutu Gethoi from Nyeri, graduated from the University of Michigan. (Photo courtesy Kari Mutu)



Professor Joseph Maitha, who graduated from the State University of New York, taught at the University of Nairobi, becoming chairman of the economics department in 1969. (Photo courtesy Kari Mutu)



Professor Frederick Okatcha, who was the first African student at the University of Central Missouri, came back to Kenya where he was a lecturer in sociology at the University of Nairobi for over 45 years. (Photo courtesy Kari Mutu)