

*I am writing this letter to my mother. She has invested so much into the academic careers of my siblings and me, paying particular attention to the quality of education we have received. I have engaged in multiple conversations with her on the compromised nature of our education system in Ghana, taking into account its historical origins and deep roots in colonialism. Hence, I believe she would be interested in hearing about Vietnam's approach to education reform through the Tonkin Free School in a similar anti-colonial context.*

Mama Vic,

*Ete sen?* I hope you are doing well, *Nyame Adom*. I am writing to share some new insights into our favorite topic of conversation: education reform. Did you happen to hear about the Minister of Education's national campaign for reforming Ghana's education system through digitization? I haven't been able to stop thinking about it, given its relevance to our previous conversations regarding the correct approach to educational reform for post-colonial Ghana. Around the same time, I also learned about the Tonkin Free School, an anti-colonial education reform initiative founded in 1907 in Hanoi, Vietnam. Learning about their efforts has given me fresh insights into what to make of the minister's campaign. The Tonkin Free School was a push towards embracing a new mode of education heavily based on Western models, aimed at improving Vietnam and exploring the use of education as a tool for national revival after colonial domination. The Tonkin Free School's vision for a "civilization of new learning" is one I thought you would find quite interesting, as it offers a novel perspective on our previous conversations about quality education in a post- or anti-colonial context.

Phan Chau Trinh, a Vietnamese scholar and revolutionary, was one of the primary thinkers behind the development of the Tonkin Free School. Trinh was deeply inspired by enlightenment ideals, believing strongly that civilization in a postcolonial context was contingent upon "the development of the people's knowledge" ("A Civilization of New Learning," 1907, p. 370). He stood staunchly against the restoration of the Chinese monarchy. Instead, he advocated

for educational and democratic freedom as the surest path to independence and nation-building, which informed his support for the Tonkin Free School.

The central idea of this Tonkin Free School confronts an all-too-familiar postcolonial dilemma: whether or not to use the “master’s tools” (elements of imperialism, in this case) in a nation’s fight for liberation. Should imperial systems, along with all their products, be shunned entirely? Or is there some benefit to be gained from selectively adapting the “good” aspects of the imperial order to build strong, modern nations? This is a question that every post-colonial society must carefully consider in its quest for liberation through reform, as it then informs the nature of its approach to liberation. The Tonkin Free School adopted the latter approach, educating the Vietnamese populace by mimicking Western-style curricula to meet the demands of the modern world and gain relevance in a contemporary context. The school was founded on the belief that to stay relevant in a world dominated by imperial systems, one must borrow some structural elements from these systems to achieve upward mobility.

This train of thought is reflected in Ghana’s digitization reforms. Recent government initiatives have celebrated the provision of tablets and other digital technologies to schoolchildren, echoing the global race toward technological modernization. The Minister of Education has explicitly mentioned in his campaign that his digitization initiative will aim to put Ghana on par with the first world. He has similarly adopted a Western framework for executing his plan, proudly citing the United States and the United Kingdom as sources of inspiration. There is the underlying notion of fraternity with imperial systems.

As you already know, Ma, I have always held the firm belief that imperialism was inextricably linked to all that stemmed from it, including educational structures. Hence, any reforms towards the goal of decolonization must be authentically Ghanaian in order to have the

desired effect. However, engaging with this text challenged me to reconsider my earlier convictions, leading me toward a more nuanced middle ground.. I have warmed up to the idea of borrowing and somewhat dispelled the notion of “purity” I once held on so closely to. This might come as a surprise, but allow me the opportunity to explain my sudden change of heart.

The Tonkin Free School’s emphasis on modernity was what struck me. It drew my mind to the harsh truth that the era of colonization and imperialism considerably altered the social dynamics of the world as we know it, anchoring Europe and the West as the focal point of civilization, forcing all other regions to adjust accordingly. As unfortunate as this is, we cannot deny the fact that we live in these present times, and this might require us to adapt to these systems in some ways to keep up with the new world. Previously, I would have argued that the digitization of education was completely irrelevant in Ghana. I would have cited a plethora of issues that should take precedence over this act. However, I now recognize the importance of joining the technological race and how that might help Ghana keep up with the rest of the world.

That being said, this can be a fragile line, and we must tread it with caution. We must be cautious not to lose ourselves in these templates we borrow from imperial nations. We may not be centered in the global sphere, but as a free nation, we have the power to center ourselves within our national context. These templates must be considered in conjunction with our existing knowledge systems. The advocates for the Tonkin Free School sought to form a new identity with this borrowed template. The historical context of Vietnam made it such that the many years of imperialism prior to French rule made them a people without a cultural identity. We do not share this historical context; we had a strong, established cultural identity before colonization, and we must not abandon that knowledge.

In conclusion, the Tonkin Free School provided me with a novel understanding of the complex realities of educational reform in postcolonial societies. While borrowing from imperial systems can offer tools for survival in a rapidly modernizing world, it must never come at the expense of losing our own identity. Ghana's path forward must strike a balance between adaptation and rootedness—embracing the possibilities of technology and modern education, while centering on our history, values, and cultural knowledge. As you always tell me, Ma, “*Se wo were fi na wosan kɔfa a, yenkyi*”—if you forget and return to reclaim your roots, it is never wrong. True reform does not require us to abandon who we are; it demands that we build from it.