LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor of the African Studies Bulletin:

I have been most relieved to learn that the Peace Corps representatives are being given a well-planned, thorough briefing by leading scholars in appropriate fields, so that they will be prepared to make the most of their opportunities, and to create favourable impressions, when they go abroad. I say that I was relieved, as I had been somewhat apprehensive that these people might be sent without adequate preparation, as are many visitors who come to Africa.

I am especially concerned with American university researchers whose impact in Africa "has not been uniformly favourable", to quote Professor Wickert (African Studies Bulletin Vol. III No. IV). I can confirm, from my own experience, instances of "unfavourable impact", and I wish to offer two suggestions which, if adopted, might help to obviate these unfortunate impressions. Knowing that most of the A.S.A. members are seasoned African travellers, I do not aim my remarks at them: to do so would be presumptious. But members might through their positions throughout the U.S., be able to assist in carrying out the suggestions, if they are feasible:

(1) American colleges and universities should arrange periodic orientation courses for researchers, so that (as a minimum goal), attention will have been drawn to the basic background reading desirable, and advice given of the cultural differences which will be encountered.
(2) The African Studies Association should draw up lists of research priorities for each area, in consultation with African institutions.

I am aware that many formidable difficulties would be associated with each suggestion; nevertheless, it might be worth attempting some action. May I add a few random remarks to support my suggestions? (These remarks arise out of my own experience in Ghana, but are probably valid for other parts of Africa, with varying degrees of emphasis).

I use the 'researcher' as a convenient omnibus term to include not only conventional scholars from universities, but also students spending the summer vacation on projects, as well as representatives of foundations, international organisations and other institutions who are making some sort of enquiries -- and (an important inclusion) any wives who accompany their husbands.

(1) Basic Reading

Before coming to Africa, the researcher should read the standard works in his particular field, and of his chosen area: There are good bibliographies and advice is readily available. All researchers, regardless of their field, should have some prior knowledge of the history and present condition of the society. It would save the researcher so much time, and allow him to start by asking relevant questions rather than irritating new acquaintances by questions which expose his ignorance. This, one might think, is so obvious as not to be worth saying. I should not say it unless I had frequently met visitors who have not complied with this simple rule.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S056815370070117X Published online by Cambridge University Press

(2) Understanding Local Cultures and Societies

Some researchers have a ready sympathy, a quick and keen understanding of other people and their cultures: those who lack this sensibility can usually be trained. It is noticeable that most young Americans who visit here (students who come for a year at the university or for a vacation work-camp under Operation Cross Roads) are markedly better able to adjust to the different culture. This is accounted for partly by the greater flexibility of youth, and partly by the fact that whilst wide-eyed innocence may be charming at 20, it is tiresome at 40.

Perhaps specific examples would help:

(a) Servants are a well defined group and they prefer to realise the expectations of their own society -- to be treated with courtesy and to receive a "dash" for any special service -- rather than to be invited to use the guest's first name.

(b) Some visiting researchers are still so heavily enmeshed in their own cultural values, especially regarding hygiene, that they (albeit unwillingly) often offend their hosts. They should be advised that life in most parts of tropical Africa need not be unhealthy, providing a few simple rules are followed, such as taking prophylactics against malaria and boiling water (or drinking beer or coca-cola rather than water). There is no need to be perpetually afraid of illness, and it also should be stressed that standards of personal cleanliness are generally extremely high (in West Africa).

(c) Senior politicians, Civil Servants and other responsible men are busy, and researchers should not expect, as a right, access to them without delay or formality, although such access is frequently given with good humour and alacrity. I have had occasion to explain to various researchers that the President of Ghana cannot be seen by casual visitors who have no specific purposes; and that one should not begin a conversation by making derogatory statements on the new society nor by making categoric statements about American policy. (It is a hard truth for some researchers to accept that many of the people will not feel profoundly involved in the affairs of the United States, and that they view the affairs of the world from very different premises).

(d) It is desirable that researchers, especially in the social sciences, should be able to use suitable concepts; if they insist on using only those applicable in the U.S.A., they will make little progress in understanding local social facts. To be more exact, confusion can be created by the uncritical use of such terms as prostitution, democracy, schizophrenia, upper-class, -- to select a few at random. Each of these words has a meaning in relation to the local society, and this meaning may be very different from that attached to it in another culture.

(e) As well as understanding the society, an understanding of the common physical phenomena helps: a researcher who, after three months residence, failed to identify a banana tree or a cocoa tree, would hardly inspire confidence.

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(3) Choice of Topic for Research

This is linked to the first suggestion, that researchers should do some basic reading. Many of the projects undertaken are pretentious, unreal, expensive, badly designed and allow insufficient time in the field; a closer knowledge of the literature might have caused second thoughts. For example, preliminary reading would have helped to avoid the disappointment in store for the researcher who had arranged to make a study of market women in West Africa, in the belief that this was a pioneering study. She was oblivious of the several studies already made, having failed to consult the literature. (This is not to say, of course, that there is no need for second studies: in fact in many areas a follow-up or comparative study would be of the greatest value, but the researcher should at least be familiar with published results of any other inquiries in the same field).

There would probably be broad general agreement on research priorities, despite individual differences of emphasis. In Ghana, as in most other parts of Africa, there is in many fields a need for collecting basic and simple information before more elaborate enquiries can be conducted. Thus, in the field of sociology one of the main needs is to have ethnographic descriptive studies made of different communities. Once this has been done, it will be more sensible to make studies of deviancy, or "Ghanaian attitudes to other countries", or other enquiries which are at present likely to fail for lack of fundamental data. Frequently an intensive study of one aspect of the problem, in one area, will be more meaningful than a diffuse and too ambitious a project.

What I have said will not be new to members of the A.S.A., but all may not be aware of the more glaring lapses which prompt these remarks. Now that Americans have replaced British as the most inveterate travellers, they have become more vulnerable, and have had had at times, as has been said, an unfavourable impact. In the belief that (except in the most intractable cases of ethnocentrism and resistance to new ideas) this could be avoided, I offer these remarks.

David Brokensha
University of Ghana

https://doi.org/10.1017/S056815370070117X Published online by Cambridge University Press