

University Report

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

Acc 4/7/71

UNIVERSITY REPORT

No. 172

Broadcast on 31 October, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th November, 1971

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Today in 'University Report' a new service relationship between a University and teacher training colleges in Nigeria - and an exciting new research/teaching project in Ghana in archaeology. It's almost exactly three years ago now that we heard in this programme about the first honours degree course in archaeology in Black Africa being started by the University of Ghana, Legon. The course, which is by all accounts very successful, was largely set up by Professor Merrick Posnansky, and when he spoke then about the importance of archaeology as a fully fledged degree subject, he stressed the need for Africa's archaeologists to be trained in Africa; and of the equally pressing need for more archaeologists to be available to carry out the research necessary to provide schools, universities and so on with materials to teach their own national or regional history. Well now Professor Posnansky and his Department of Archaeology at Legon have embarked on a new project to help further fulfill these needs. In Accra Christine Oppong asked Professor Posnansky what it is all about.

PROF. POSNANSKY: The research project that we're engaged in is to try to find out something about the origins of West African trade. Over the past ten years excavations have been conducted in Ghana and they've shown that during the period after about 1300 A.D. there was a considerable amount of activity. States grew up like the Ashanti State in the forest area and it seems that a lot of this activity was due to the commencement of long distance trade between Ghana and the River Niger. Gold was collected in the Ghana area and then traded to towns like Jenni and ultimately Timbuctoo and across the Sahara. What we want to find out is something about the mechanics of the trade; we want to find out something about the towns that developed, and we started excavating a large town, a place called Vego, last year and we hope to continue with our excavations at Vego for another four years. Our main purpose is to try to find out the nature of a trading term in the period between about 1300 and 1700, but a further emphasis in our research project is the training of Ghanaian and other West African archaeologists.

CHRISTINE OPPONG: So to what extent, then, is the project a research project, and to what extent is it geared towards your department's teaching programme?

- PROF. POSNANSKY: Well what we want to do is to try to feed research into teaching so that students take part in different types of research. Students take part on the excavation and students also take part in analysing the material at the site. Because we are spending quite a long time at one particular site we're erecting a house where students can come twice a year and live very very close to the site, so that they can excavate even during the rainy season, during July, August and September. We hope to try to have a feed-back from research into teaching so that instead of students learning about how to classify material in the University, we hope they can do this in the field and capture some of the excitement of discovering new history, which would then be fed back into teaching at Legon.
- CHRISTINE OPPONG: What are some of the other advantages of having such a permanent centre, as well as the fact that you can house students there?
- PROF. POSNANSKY: Well, one of the bigger advantages of a permanent centre is that we can do fairly continuous and fairly complete excavation of one particular site. Previously in West Africa and over most of tropical Africa archaeologists have excavated at one particular site. They have learnt something about the age of that site but learnt very very little about the, what we can call perhaps, the anthropology of that particular site. What we want to find out about is the layout of a town; we want to find out the size of different houses; we want to show how one quarter of a town is related to another part of the town; we want to find out a lot more about the way a town functioned, the changes which may have taken place in a particular town over a long period of time. We don't want to find out about one or two houses, we want to find out about a whole town, and we want to find out about relationships of that town with the area in which it is situated, so that part of our work will consist in excavating other sites in a fifty mile radius of the research centre.
- CHRISTINE OPPONG: What kind of discoveries are you hoping to make, then, in the next few years as a result of this project?
- PROF. POSNANSKY: Well the types of discoveries that we have made already is that we've found out something about the nature of the houses, we've found out something about the nature and scale of the trade which was going on. In the next few years we want to find out more about the density of settlement by excavating a large number of houses. We want also to find out how one town compares with another town, so that we will be excavating in the next three or four years several other towns, perhaps on a smaller scale, in Ivory Coast and hopefully in Upper Volta so that we can have a comparative assessment of the trade between the Forest Regions and the Sudanic belt.
- GWYNETH HENDERSON: Professor Merrick Posnansky, Head of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Ghana, Legon, was talking there to Christine Oppong. Interesting to note the stress again on the importance of trade in pre-colonial days - last week we heard about it in East Africa from the new teaching folder "Safari - Records of East Africa's Past." And now, in fact, we go on to a rather different type of teaching material - different in the sense that it is not providing teachers with materials to teach with - but

students with books to enjoy! Ife University's Institute of Education has started an Extensive Reading scheme. What's it all about ?

JAMES KERR:

The purpose of this scheme really is to provide good, modern reading material for student teachers at the Grade II Teacher Training Colleges. That is to say, teachers who will eventually become primary school teachers when they finish their courses.

GWYNETH HENDERSON:

Mr. James Kerr of the Institute of Education at Ife University on the purpose of their Extensive Reading Scheme. So what do they provide? Well they provide teacher training colleges in the Western State with book boxes containing about fifty carefully selected assorted books. They have about twenty-five boxes in circulation amongst, at the moment, seventeen colleges. All the collections of books are different, so that each term an individual college gets a new set. The main point is that the books are not text books - they are books to be read for pleasure by students, not studied. In each box, plenty of fiction - mainly Africa, simple popular science books on subjects like electricity, popular psychology. Then there's poetry, plays, and books on hobbies like photography, jazz, stamp-collecting, and so on. Well it sounds marvellous, but why, Akin Euba asked Mr. Kerr, why are they only serving teacher training colleges?

JAMES KERR:

Well one reason why we selected training colleges is that we feel that they are somewhat neglected or under endowed in the present educational framework. Also they are a manageable number because we only have, I think, twenty-one, or possibly twenty-two such colleges in the Western State, and since this is a State University at Ife, we don't go beyond the bounds of the Western State at present. Now the problem with the Colleges is that their own libraries tend to be extremely antiquated and small. In one I visited some time ago I found a handbook of British botany dating from 1895 or something like that which would possibly have antique value on the book market elsewhere. But one feels this is not the sort of reading material which the students should have, and it's clear that the colleges at present can't afford to supplement their libraries very much. We also feel that their curriculum on the whole is very narrow, that to a large extent the teacher training colleges are providing a kind of surrogate or replacement for secondary education, and there's great concentration on passing examinations, as everywhere else, and not enough emphasis, we feel, on general education. But the reading scheme is not simply designed to provide opportunities for general education and one could add self-education, which personally I believe is very important in a teacher. Since English at the moment is the medium of instruction for upper primary schools and the language of higher education generally in Nigeria, we feel that extensive reading of interesting material is one way in which students can almost unconsciously increase their knowledge of the language and their familiarity with usage in English, with structures, vocabulary and so on. And we also feel that the reading skill itself is extremely important, and that one can only become a faster and more efficient reader by reading a lot. We hope that by providing suitable material for the colleges the students will be stimulated to read much more, with the kind of benefits I just described.

AKIN EUBA: What books do you find students like most?

JAMES KERR: Well, it's a little bit early to state with any certainty which books are the most popular. We are still waiting for feed-back from the colleges. All we know so far is that most of them are very enthusiastic about the scheme: it costs them nothing, it enlightens their courses, and all I can say now would be a number of guesses that my experience with students of this age group, which would be about eighteen to twenty-five for the most part, is that they like fiction, of course, - African fiction. They are interested in politics I would say: political memoirs by Chief Awolowo for example. They like success stories told by Africans - there is an East African book called "I Will Try" by Legson Kayira, which I think is very popular because it describes how a poor boy managed to make good in the educational system, for his persistence and so forth. In Yoruba land, at least, there is a very marked preference for drama - I am surprised how ready students are to read plays, to act plays and what a quick dramatic sense they have, which they don't seem to have for poetry. Poetry is the subject that is most dreaded in the English syllabus.

AKIN EUBA: Have you had any problems with preventing loss of books?

JAMES KERR: Well, I'm not a professional librarian, but any librarian will tell you that if books are used some of them are going to be lost, borrowed, stolen, or will simply fall to pieces from heavy use. We do lose, in fact, a small number of books each time they go out, possibly five or six per term. But since the books are cheap and mainly paperbacks we don't consider that serious. It is much better that the books should be read. If one considers that a student in a class of forty reads about five books in a term, and twenty-five boxes have gone out since the scheme started, my mathematics brings that out to be about eight thousand books being read within training colleges in the Western State which would otherwise not have been read if the scheme didn't exist.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Well that's a lot of knowledge and a lot of pleasure! Mr. James Kerr of the Institute of Education at the University of Ife, talking to Akin Euba. And since, as Mr. Kerr says, the books are all paperbacks and relatively cheap, this would seem to be an ideal way of getting a big educational return on a small capital expenditure. Ife doesn't claim their scheme is original - perhaps it isn't - but it is working! And so we come to the end of another 'University Report'. I'll be back next week, but until then, from me, Gwyneth Henderson, it's goodbye for now.

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