

THE CHALLENGE AND THE RESPONSE

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African studies "... have lacked both adequate endowment and a sufficient degree of thought and planning to establish them on a permanent basis within the normal educational range of our Universities.

Failure to give the special attention and assistance, which these studies require, has resulted in a vicious circle. The parsimonious scale of university establishments and the lack of a continuous tradition of scholarship have meant that few students were attracted, and the hesitant trickle of those who were gave little encouragement to university authorities to provide a greater variety of teaching." (H.M.S.O. 1947, p. 23.)

One could be forgiven if one thought this commentary was written about present day conditions in South Africa. In fact the statement comes from the Scarbrough Commission Report published in the U.K. in 1947, a generation ago. In view of the continuing interest in Africa in British and American universities it is intended to examine the response of South African universities to the challenge presented by the study of Africa.

The 1939-1945 war, while strengthening the existing links between Britain and the countries of Africa also spot-lighted how few people possessed a specialist knowledge of the African Continent. The scale of university teaching and research was considered by the Scarbrough Commission as inadequate in relation to national needs. The unfavourable situation that the Scarbrough Commission found was attributed to defects in organization and library holdings; limited opportunities for travel abroad and research; the neglect of the non-linguistic disciplines and the failure to attract students. Consequently the Commission recommended the expenditure of money on the development of stronger departments in the universities, on libraries and on encouraging staff and post-graduate students to travel in Africa. The recommendations aimed at building up "... an academic tradition comparable in quality and in continuity with those of the major humanities and sciences". (H.M.S.O. 1947, p. 69.)

There are two aspects of the Scarbrough Commission Report that are of particular importance. In the first instance there was concern that the universities should help meet the needs of the nation through both teaching and research. Secondly, it was accepted that university departments had to be strengthened even though the student enrolment was likely to be small.

Some progress in the field of Colonial and Commonwealth studies embracing many countries in both Asia and Africa took place in the U.K. in the immediate post-war period, but not only

because of the recommendations made by the Scarborough Commission. As the former Colonial territories gained political independence the attitude towards them changed remarkably. The transfer of power meant that they were no longer wards of the Colonial Office. It was recognized that there was a need to know more about the political structure, social systems and economic problems of these new nations. Historical association and the widespread use of the English language reinforced these trends and desires.

In 1959 the University Grants Committee decided to review the developments which had taken place in the Universities following the report of the Scarborough Commission. A sub-committee under the chairmanship of Sir William Hayter was appointed for this task.¹ In accordance with its terms of reference the sub-committee evaluated the progress that had been made in African studies since 1947, re-assessed the position of the universities in this sphere and recommended measures to assist them. The sub-committee stated that the role of the universities was more than ever important.

"The point which is mainly relevant to the sub-committee's work is that the political centre of gravity of the world, which up to the time of the Second World War was in Western Europe has now moved outwards, east west and south. But the British Educational System has taken little account of these developments. So far as it considers any area outside the United Kingdom, it still seems able only to see Western Europe, with an occasional bow to North America and the Commonwealth. Western European languages, civilizations and history dominate the arts faculties of British Universities. It seems to the sub-committee that this state of affairs is anachronistic and shows an inadequate response to the changes now occurring in the world. This failure in response is not of course peculiar to the universities, but it is the universities which have the strongest obligation to correct it." (H. M. S. O. 1961, p. 41.)

The quotation from the Hayter Committee Report underlines the continuing need for understanding and knowledge in areas beyond Western Europe and reaffirms the role of the universities in providing the basis for this knowledge and understanding. The obligation of the universities in this respect is emphasised. The challenge was to accept Africa as a worthwhile region for university scholarship, to widen the horizons of university teaching and research and to make contact with people of different cultures.

In making its recommendations the Hayter Committee was influenced by the concept of area studies which had developed at

1. The sub-committee also investigated the position of Oriental, Slavonic and Eastern European Studies.

a number of American Universities in the post-war period. Two aspects of development in the United States are worthy of mention - the scale and the nature of the organization.

Prior to 1958 only a few universities had set up centres of area studies based on funds donated by the larger Foundations such as the Rockefeller, Carnegie and Ford Foundations. Fellowships were established, libraries built up and travel and study abroad were subsidized. In the decade starting in 1958 the expansion and extension of centres of area studies was explosive and was financed mainly from public funds. What caused the change?

Unfavourable reports of American activities abroad because of general ignorance about foreign countries, coupled with the belief that the first Sputnik was a clear indication of Russian scientific superiority, initiated a period of self-criticism and soul searching. General dissatisfaction with the existing conditions led to the National Defence Education Act, passed in 1958, and supported by large appropriations necessary to finance it. \$1000 million was authorised to be spent before 1962 on the teaching of science, mathematics and modern languages in schools and universities. An indirect yet important by-product of the National Defence Education Act was that area study centres, including African studies, benefitted from this stimulus.

The study centre provides the focus for work being done by various disciplines on the area or region, e.g., Africa, Eastern Europe or South America. The fact that a variety of studies is likely to cover a particular area helps to break down the barriers between the academic disciplines concerned. A potential forum exists for anthropologists, economists, geologists, geographers, historians, lawyers, linguists, sociologists and others to discuss the region and gain an understanding of one another's problems and work. The scope for true inter-disciplinary work is unlimited.

Having recognised the need for a greater knowledge and understanding of other parts of the world, including Africa, both the United States and Great Britain set about meeting that need through the establishment of area studies within the universities. The awakening interest in the affairs of Africa was focussed through particular institutions that were created for just that purpose.

Where does South Africa fit into the pattern of development that has emerged in the U.K. and the U.S.A.? Is South Africa aware that a challenge exists in this field?

One hears today about South Africa's more outward-looking political policies. South Africans are coming into greater contact with foreign peoples than was the case even a decade ago. Government officials are having to deal face to face with people of different races. The developing Bantustans must eventually result in direct dialogue between blacks and whites across the political and racial barriers. The Republic is investing money

in selected areas of Africa such as Malawi. With these direct contacts increasing one would expect that dialogue and aid would be more fruitful if the officials concerned had a thorough knowledge of the countries they were dealing with. It is perhaps pertinent to ask if South African leaders in politics, industry, commerce or the civil service have a comprehensive knowledge of their own country, let alone other countries on the continent of Africa. It is to be hoped, for example, that those helping Malawi with its new capital city, Lilongwe, would know not only about engineering and architecture, but also about the social background of the people and the nature of the surrounding country that is to be served by the new city. If the question is approached honestly, it must be doubted whether there are many people in South Africa, in any capacity, with a thorough knowledge of either the languages or the cultures, or the political institutions, or the economies or the geography of neighbouring territories, including the Bantustans.

What, for example, is known of the physical environment of our Continent? Certainly it is possible to find attractive generalized maps of vegetation, geology and soils. Realistic analysis and planning though cannot be based on generalizations. The soil maps look impressive, but more often than not the soil types shown are inferential. Because of certain climatic and geological conditions prevailing, it is assumed that certain soil groups will be found. Inference and extrapolation are hazardous procedures when based on imperfect knowledge. The assessment of land quality and land capability remain intractable yet vital problems in relating population numbers to the carrying capacity of the land. The challenge is one to be met by geomorphologists, soil scientists, agriculturalists and those interested in ecology.

If little is known about the physical environment it is unfortunately true that even less is known about people. For example births and deaths do not have to be registered amongst the African rural population in South Africa. Consequently it is well-nigh impossible to calculate even basic demographic trends for this racial group. Here is a challenge to the administrators.

Throughout Africa there is a drift of people to the towns. Very often the movement bears no relationship to employment opportunities. One has to look no further than Grahamstown for an illustration of this fact. The move from rural to urban areas is an inevitable but painful aspect of economic growth. Not only must employment opportunities be created but investments are needed in housing, training and social services. Because the problems of urbanization must be treated comprehensively, there is a fruitful field for co-operation between the economist, educationalist, historian, sociologist, urban geographer, and town planner.

Population trends in twenty-one magisterial districts of the Cape Midlands and Karroo Region illustrate many of the problems

referred to. In absolute numbers the population changes between 1904 and 1970 can be summarized as follows - the whites declined from 74,000 to 55,000; the Coloureds increased from 41,000 to 88,000; and the Bantu increased from 117,000 to 277,000.

According to Truu (Truu 1971) rural depopulation amongst whites in the Midlands and Karroo Region has been more rapid than in the Republic as a whole. The process of depopulation has been occurring throughout the century. The problem therefore is not new. The continuing decline in numbers indicates that suitable adjustments to changing conditions have still to be made.

The sample tabulations of the 1970 Census (Govt. Printer 1970 a & b) indicate that in the Cape Midlands and Karroo Region the percentage of whites under the age of 15 years varies from 26% to 33%. The corresponding figures for the Coloured group vary from 42% to 54%. The economic implications of these statistics cannot be ignored. If the Coloured people are to stay in the Region, educational facilities, housing and employment opportunities will have to be provided. If they do not stay in the Region the metropolitan centres must plan to cope with the influx.

Unlike the Coloureds, the whites are an ageing group. The percentage of the white population over 65 years of age varies from 6% to 16%. A different set of problems is related to these conditions. In assessing the needs of the Region social amenities, hospitals and old-age homes must be given consideration.

Ideally the agricultural sector of a country should meet the local demand for food as well as provide foreign exchange through the export of its products. The continuing and accelerating movement of population to the cities, however, often necessitates the reorganization of agriculture. The consolidation of holdings, a change in the system of land tenure and the introduction of new techniques of farming are examples of measures frequently introduced. Agrarian reform provides a challenge to both the agriculturalist and the geographer.

In agrarian reform the question of incentive is of great importance. Having nationalized the land and turned the greater part of it into collectives and state farms successive Russian leaders from Lenin onwards have had to introduce, from time to time, special incentives to encourage greater agricultural productivity. One such incentive has been the concession permitting peasants to own small private holdings. The same concession has been a feature of the commune in China. In the context of Africa more attention could well be devoted to the question of incentive, particularly in relation to the numerous agricultural resettlement schemes that have failed. The Tomlinson Commission in South Africa devoted much time and thought to the question of encouraging the Africans to become full-time farmers. It was hoped that the formula of the economic holding would be adequate for the purpose. In assessing the pro-

cess of rehabilitation and resettlement one should therefore give careful thought to the incentive created for each family by the prospect of earning R120 p. a. from the toil of the land or half that amount if the family were not fortunate in being allocated a full holding. Closely related to this aspect of incentive is that of the perception of the environment and farming system by the local inhabitants in contrast to the environment and farming system seen by the western-orientated research worker. Research along these lines would involve many disciplines.

One could add to the list of recognised university disciplines for which the problems of the continent are relevant. The challenge is there for all. Yet there are deficiencies in the number of people capable of providing expert knowledge about South Africa and her neighbours. The universities must assess their responsibility in this regard. In accounting for an unsatisfactory state of affairs a number of points can be listed.

- i) The undergraduate courses do not offer a great deal of specialization on African topics.
- ii) There is a lack of contact in academic circles with the independent African states as well as with the Bantustans.
- iii) The volume of research is small.
- iv) The library material is inadequate.
- v) Travel grants for visiting areas of research are practically non-existent.
- vi) The relevant research being conducted by various disciplines remains largely unco-ordinated, and there is an apparent reluctance to organize and participate in inter-disciplinary studies.

It is to be hoped that the unsatisfactory record of the universities in the field of inter-disciplinary studies is not to be equated with an inability to work together or a lack of willingness to try. The universities have still to show conclusively that they can respond to the challenge.

Despite its position on the continent of Africa, South Africa has not arrived at the stage Great Britain reached in 1947 in relation to African studies. Certainly there is no indication that the reassessment evident in the U.S.A. in the late 1950's is present even in embryo form. Regrettably self-criticism is absent from the South African scene. Nevertheless there is a growing awareness that inter-disciplinary studies can and should contribute to the understanding and knowledge of the country and sub-continent. There are also indications that research workers are willing to apply their experience gained in South Africa to

other independent states.

The possibilities of inter-disciplinary research can be illustrated by taking two examples.

The first example concerns an exploratory research project undertaken in Zululand and Swaziland by Professor C.de B. Webb, a historian, and myself, a geographer. The investigation not yet complete concerns the emergence of three contiguous chiefdoms, the Mthethwa, the Ndwandwe and the Ngwane during the early 19th century. The start of Shaka's rule (c. 1818) provides a convenient watershed in the history of the North-eastern Nguni peoples. Under Shaka's powerful, autocratic rule a nation was born but prior to this there were more than fifty independent clans scattered throughout the territory, later known as Zululand. In the prelude to the rise of Shaka the Mthethwa, Ndwandwe and Ngwane chiefdoms assumed particular importance. The evidence suggests three chiefdoms strong enough to subordinate many of their previously independent neighbours, but not strong enough to subordinate one another. The investigation of the dominant supremacies can be divided into three parts. An assessment of the environment as a factor of significance, an examination of the historical events and finally an analysis of the inter-relationships between the chiefdoms themselves. Was the rise of the three supremacies at much the same time pure coincidence or is there a more rational explanation? What importance must one attach to the qualities of leadership, or to a perception of the environment that other contemporary leaders did not possess, or to a completely different set of factors?

In examining the importance of the environment to the three North-eastern Nguni systems it has been shown that veld-type was significant. The area of Zululand Thornveld, (After Acocks 1953), part of which was under the control of each supremacy, was important for three main reasons. (Daniel, 1973.) In the first instance the Zululand Thornveld provides good grazing for cattle. Secondly, the North-eastern Nguni may have known the grazing potential of the Zululand Thornveld because a similar veld type would have been encountered if they had followed the Lebombo plateau before they moved into Zululand and Swaziland. Thirdly, the Zululand Thornveld occupies a transitional position linking the Lowveld with sour grasslands at higher altitudes. By practising transhumance (the seasonal movement of stock to different climatic and vegetation regions) the chiefdoms controlling the Zululand Thornveld could have made judicious use of three major veld types - the grasslands where effective grazing would be restricted to eight months in any one year, the Zululand Thornveld where grazing is restricted to approximately 10 months in the year, and the Lowveld where all-year grazing is possible. Of interest is the fact that transhumance is practised by Africans near the Pongola River Gorge to this day. The value of the Lowveld's pastures would have been at their greatest in the winter months when the threat of both malaria and nagana was weakest.

There is also evidence that the Africans believed nagana was spread by the saliva of big game contaminating the veld. Consequently they eliminated the antelopes. (Henning, 1949, p. 524.) In spite of the lack of scientific knowledge the North-eastern Nguni showed remarkable insight because nearly a hundred years later it was proved that wild animals can serve as reservoirs of infection harbouring pathogenic trypanosomes.

From bringing together the knowledge of several disciplines it can be seen that in a society in which cattle play an important role, the control of the transitional veld type could have been an important factor influencing the economic and political strength of the three supremacies in relation to their less fortunate neighbours in possession of fewer veld types. The environmental relationships cannot be ignored in the spatial pattern of political growth amongst the North-eastern Nguni of the early 19th century. It still remains to investigate the interaction between the three political supremacies in terms of the environment, the qualities of leadership and the influence of outside stimuli. The doors of inter-disciplinary research remain open.

Working with colleagues in other disciplines certainly increases one's own perception. Let me give you an example from my own experience. The start of the project with Professor Webb involved the location of kraal sites. In Swaziland the search for kraal sites and the areas occupied by the Ngwane centred on the location of the Royal Graves. For seven years I had studied economic aspects of the rural areas in Swaziland. I knew that the sites of the Royal Graves were marked on the map and moreover my fieldwork had taken me past the grave sites on numerous occasions. Because I had been concerned with other matters I had never tried to identify the map reference with the features actually found on the ground. The identification was only done recently when the Royal Graves became an important element in the inter-disciplinary study. I wondered how for years I could have failed to notice the striking physical characteristics of the grave sites. The rocky outcrop, the dense bush coverage and the knife-like vegetation boundary at the base of the outcrop are characteristics that distinguish the Royal Graves from surrounding areas.

The second example taken to illustrate the possibilities of inter-disciplinary research concerns the collection of statistics.

The computer has ushered in a new era for the scientific analysis of data but the quality of the results is governed by the quality of the data fed to the computer in the first instance. In the sphere of human activity reliable statistics are woefully lacking. Poor statistics hinder research and analysis. Without analysis, sound planning for the future is impossible.

Even when it comes to an apparently simple question such as 'how many people are there?' a satisfactory answer cannot always

be given. In 1952 the Nigerian census revealed a population of 36 million. In 1962 a figure of 55 million was recorded. Northern Nigeria made the mistake of announcing its census results first, but when it found that it did not have 50% of the country's population and therefore 50% of the legislative seats, a recount was ordered and 9 million extra souls were found, thereby restoring the status quo. In South Africa on the otherhand a gross under-enumeration of the non-white population is more likely than an over-enumeration.

A decade ago no one in Swaziland knew how many freehold farmers there were in the territory. Census returns were sent only to those farmers who returned forms the previous year. Consequently, according to the records, there was a steady if not alarming decrease in the number of people on the land over the years. In South Africa to this day it is not known how many farmers there are amongst the white population. It is true that records of farms are kept by Divisional Councils and by extension officers, but the research worker must possess the patience of Job if he is to reconcile the conflicting information obtained from these sources. Leading agriculturalists admit that the agricultural census data (which appears regularly in large volumes) is so inaccurate that it cannot be used with any confidence. Why then does the Government continue to spend money on a farce of this nature? Scarce capital could be put to better use. The formulation of a system for the collection of representative data is a matter of urgency. Here the academic could play a major role in helping the authorities.

The problem of collecting adequate and relevant data exists throughout the continent of Africa but is particularly acute in the rural areas where the need for planning is greatest. Development projects cannot be successfully executed unless the basic data has been collected, studied and analyzed. A framework for coherent correlation of data is often lacking, preventing the full picture of the varied problems and potentialities being obtained.

In 1960 an interesting experiment in fact collecting was conducted in Swaziland. A combined survey of the Swazi rural areas was undertaken by the Swaziland Administration and the Institute for Social Research at the University of Natal. The project was planned as an inter-disciplinary programme from the very beginning. In view of the practical difficulties of conducting the investigation in depth over some one million hectares a sampling technique was formulated. For this undertaking the services of a qualified statistician were needed. Equally, because of the need to relate the statistical framework to the realities of the situation on the ground and the diversity of ecological conditions in particular, the services of a geographer were required. Through inter-disciplinary co-operation it was possible to construct a statistical framework which enabled the collection of data representing the position in the Territory as a whole. The framework adopted enabled conclusions to be drawn with reasonable certainty

and comparisons made between regions. Even more important a framework of some permanence was established which would allow comparative analyses to be made of trends and patterns of development in future years. The statistician did not become a geographer, nor the geographer a statistician, but through the co-operation of disciplines a useful random sample survey was successfully completed. The shortcoming in existing statistics mentioned earlier indicates that sample surveys are likely to become increasingly necessary if reliable statistics are sought. Research workers must be trained for this type of work.

If inter-disciplinary co-operation can provide useful academic and practical results, what can be done to encourage it? Should the idea of inter-disciplinary studies related to an area be introduced at undergraduate level or later? The modern trend towards specialization within each discipline works against the idea of a degree course, involving several subjects, being offered in African Studies. If after three or four years study, students have difficulty in mastering the complexities of one subject it can be argued that a 'combined' degree could only lead to the dilution of its component parts. In South African universities the above argument would apply particularly at Honours level. Can one achieve the required level of competence if two academic disciplines, say history and geography, have been pursued in the fourth year of study? In which discipline would the student be competent to undertake research for a higher degree? It would be undesirable to have two standards - one for African studies candidates and one for single-discipline candidates.

Rhodes University had the vision to introduce interdepartmental studies. The fact that the Honours degree in the African Studies programme did not prove successful could be due to the hazards of organising a course based on combined studies. The trend today is towards specialization coupled with a move away from the general to the particular. Nevertheless, with the pyramid structure of the undergraduate courses, provision could be made through informal discussion at departmental level to teach, where possible, on similar areas, e.g., if the Department of Political Science were to include in their courses work on the constitutions of the newly independent countries in Africa, and if the Department of Geography were to study the same countries, the student interested in Africa could obtain a varied background for his studies while retaining the advantages of specialization. Much would depend upon co-operation between the departments. For senior students - third year and honours, joint seminars and tutorials with other interested Departments could be held in order to expose students to the methods and concepts of other disciplines at an early stage in their academic careers. In this way the advantages of inter-disciplinary co-operation should become evident without the danger of losing the identity of one's own discipline.

Inter-disciplinary studies should not be aimed at creating a new class of "Africanist" and blurring the boundaries between

disciplines, but at approaching a research problem more comprehensively on the assumption that each particular discipline can contribute something of value and that through the process of working together each discipline would gain a new dimension.

In the context of inter-disciplinary co-operation, an African Studies Centre has much to recommend it because it could provide the focus for all work being done within a particular area. The Centre could co-ordinate the work and, if necessary, administer the funds for research. This type of organization provides a valuable means of bringing specialists from different disciplines into contact with one another. If a variety of research were being undertaken all studying the region - linguists, historians, geographers, lawyers, economists, social scientists, biologists and others could meet to discuss the region and its problems.

Being the focus of research and discussion the influence of the Centre could extend to undergraduates and the teaching undertaken in the Departments. To keep the Departmental links alive it is possible that the Centre staff should also do a limited amount of teaching in their own discipline. A well planned Centre of African Studies should be capable of generating a vitality and interest which would benefit the whole university.

Amongst the more important goals that a Centre of African Studies could set itself, are the following:-

- (i) An increase in the number of students and staff who come into contact with some of the other cultures of the African continent.
- (ii) A better understanding of the problems inhibiting economic development.
- (iii) An increase in the quality and volume of research.
- (iv) Specialization in particular fields of research and teaching.
- (v) The building up of a carefully selected library which includes a wide range of journals and other documentary data in addition to student textbooks.
- (vi) The co-ordination of teaching and research in various departments, for example through regular inter-disciplinary seminars.
- (vii) The responsibility of showing that inter-disciplinary research can be successfully conducted and that it is of immense value.

The selection of the area of study should not prove difficult. At most universities the immediate surrounding area would repay

detailed study - for example, the Eastern Province, Border, Ciskei and Transkei regions in the case of Rhodes. The area need not remain fixed for all time and it would be an added advantage if the study of the local area could be associated with the study of an African country beyond the borders of the Republic e.g. Lesotho or Swaziland.

If the universities are aware of the challenge being presented by Africa and particularly Southern Africa, what is their response? The response can be measured by examining the extent to which the South African Universities are consciously stimulating an awareness of the problems of the sub-continent; are establishing the vital links for the purpose of creative inter-disciplinary co-operation; are maintaining first-hand contact with the area or areas being studied; are attracting research students, and are focussing interest in area studies.

If the universities do not respond to the challenge they shall have only themselves to blame when overseas research workers with greater vision take over a field of study that rightly belongs to the South African universities and in which the universities are ideally placed to make a major contribution.

Geography, with its emphasis on locational analysis, areal differentiation, and the relationship between man and the environment, is a suitable subject to make a contribution to inter-disciplinary research and study. The Geography Department at Rhodes offers its co-operation in this sphere. In responding to the challenge of Africa, it is recognised that both research and teaching will benefit through contact with a vital and dynamic field of study which rightly belongs to the academic world. In 1907 when the future archaeologist, O. G. S. Crawford, changed courses at Oxford from classics to geography he described it in these words: [The change is] "like leaving the drawingroom for the basement: one lost caste but one did see life." The Geographers extend an invitation to all interested in inter-disciplinary co-operation to the basement, to see life.

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