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Faite R-P. Mack

Grand Valley State University

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EXCERPTS OF LETTERS FROM A
FULBRIGHT PROFESSOR IN GHANA
(1987-1988)

Faite R-P. Mack

You can imagine me all alone and trying to negotiate through Accra airport. Because my name had been misspelled, the embassy staff had assumed I was not coming and did not meet me at the airport. Instead I was greeted by some shady characters posing as official airport personnel. They told me that they could get my baggage to the front of the line and me through customs without trouble if I paid them $20 as "dash." As soon as I paid them, they disappeared. Fortunately, I still had the bulk of my money, all of my luggage, and my passport—worth $1,000 in the black market. I learned later that I was doubly fortunate in not having my cosmetics, research dolls, tape recorder or tapes confiscated by the customs officers as part of their "dash."

Outside the airport, I was mobbed by people wanting to carry my bags to the taxi. One of them who actually had a taxi drove me for $29 (generally a $3 ride) to what was supposed to be the best hotel in town, the International: it was no more than a flophouse.

As soon as I could, I called the U.S. Embassy, and Mrs. Brooks Robinson, the Cultural Affairs Officer, invited me to stay at her house, a small mansion within a walled enclosure. Living with her are two guards, an attack dog, a cook, a gardener, and a steward. All of the Embassy staff members lead very grand lives, in that, since Ghana is considered to be an "extra hardship" assignment, the government provides them with an additional 25% bonus. The distribution of wealth in Ghana is very top-heavy; those who live at the top live better than most American millionaires.

Accra, as the capital city of Ghana, has a very high density population. It is also very hot and humid (temperature is often above a hundred, and humidity about 99%), so most people live outside and crowd the streets; I am reminded of being outside Soldier Field in the aftermath of a Chicago Bears game. The outdoor city market covers nearly two square miles with stalls, open sewers, and narrow pathways; the smells, colors, action, noise and congestion are intense. However, despite some petty corruption, it seems relatively safe for a foreigner to be on the streets. The people are friendly and helpful, but they won't let me take their pictures; the camera makes them feel threatened, and even if it didn't, the single-party government labels any American photographer as a member of the C.I.A., and the police/soldiers are everywhere on the streets. Right now, things are very tense because the "leader" of Burkina Faso, the next country over, was just assassinated in a coup, and a new government was established.

It took three hours to reach Cape Coast. The government of Burkina Faso. In addition, I have heard that there is trouble with Iran. I have not even work unless I can find out what is happening on television, so my sense of well-being is tied to the sun.

Cape Coast is beautiful; it is documented that the city was the first European landfall on the African coast. Some sights include beautiful people in castle-forts, which were used by the Dutch and British. Cape Coast was once home to thousands of people who still have Dutch and British inbreeding in their genes.

I am presently staying at a house in Cape Coast. The house is on the beach. It is very quiet. The house is quite large, with a living room, a dining room, and three bedrooms. The house is not even workable for me; I need a full-time maid to help me with my daily tasks.

The extension camp that I am staying at is the University of Cape Coast. The University has 600 full-time service staff. It is an
through Accra airport. I assumed I was not being victimized by some shady operators, but they could get my trouble if I paid them later. Fortunately, I still had the $20,000 in the black money bag. Changing my cosmetics, I gave money as part of the bag to a man, who was no more than a ten-year-old boy.

I thought Brooks Robinson, the American Ambassador, was too rich and lived in a mansion within a mansion. We hired a full cook, a gardener, and a maid. There are lives, in that, since the American government provides security for its embassy in Ghana is very strong, so no one has more than a million dollars.

Accra is a 100,000 population. It is also very hot and humid about 85 percent. I was reminded of being in the desert. The outdoor city is full of vendors, and narrow streets are very intense. However, it is not as intense as some shady operators, but they could get my trouble if I paid them later. Fortunately, I still had the $20,000 in the black money bag. Changing my cosmetics, I gave money as part of the bag to a man, who was no more than a ten-year-old boy.

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It took three hours, with two police checkpoints, for the drive from Accra to Cape Coast. The government has issued a state of emergency because of the coup in Burkina Faso. In addition, the American Ambassador has warned of possible trouble with Iran. I have not yet been able to unpack my shortwave radio, which may not even work unless I can adapt it to the electricity here, so I have no real idea of what is happening in the world around us. Cape Coast has neither radio nor television, so my sense of the world will have to be tempered by the rise and fall of the sun.

Cape Coast is best described as a rustic fishing village of about 50,000 people. It is documented that Columbus, Drake, Magellan, and several other explorers, stopped here to obtain food, water, and to rest for their return trip. Fishing is done in single-trunk, dug-out boats between 2:00 and 4:00 a.m. The docks attract milling crowds of beautiful people in all modes of rainbow dress, both African and Western, though some wear rags and others nothing at all. On the prominent hills are three European castle-forts, which were constructed in the 1400s; their condition is still excellent. Cape Coast was one of the major trading and slave ports in Africa; through it passed thousands of people bound for slavery in Europe, America, and Asia. Some locals still have Dutch and Portuguese names, but most of the genetic traces of European inbreeding have vanished.

I am presently staying at one of the American Embassy residence mansions until my house is ready; twenty-five workmen are in the process of building it. It will have a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, three bedrooms, an office, a verandah, and a three-room apartment for my manservant. A Fulbright Full Professor is given accommodations that reflect what is considered to be, in this country, a very high status. I am also given a car and driver. I hired a maid, but apparently she is not acceptable, because she belongs to a tribe different from that of my head-steward, James, and, besides, he wants me to hire his son as my houseboy. James knows how everything works here and how to get things done, so it would not be wise to alienate him. I had to send the maid away with a few thousand cedis, about $20, to appease both of them.

The extension campus of the University of Cape Coast has as many buildings as does Michigan State University, but a student population of only 1,500. The University has 600 faculty and administrators and 7,000 maids, stewards, and service staff. It is an example of well-developed initial plans but the lack of resources

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to maintain or develop these intentions. It is located on breathtaking bluffs which
overlook the Gulf of Guinea, and its palm-lined beach is one of the borders of the
campus. Classes are supposed to start on November 9, and I have been assigned
graduate courses in psychology and special education and the directorship of the
Child Development and Diagnostic Center. However, the administration will close the
campus if there is a reoccurrence of student riots. I have noted police with machine
guns on the campus.

Like the country itself, the university is very male-dominated. All of the professors
and most of the departmental secretaries and clerks are men. Women lead very
limited and defined lives. Polygamy is still legal: a man can have as many wives as
he can afford.

The Reverend Doctor Brockman, head of my department, is an African priest who
received his Ph.D. in Vienna. His specialty is Educational Psychology, and besides
being the parish priest, he is also Dean of Students. Cape Coast is a secular
university, but Ghana allows an unusual amount of religious tolerance and cooperation. Missionaries seem to be a major industry here. Cape Coast is the
foundating place of the Catholic Church in Ghana and has its own bishop. Dr.
Brockman has been a visiting professor at Notre Dame and would be a premier
exchange professor at Grand Valley.

The Embassy Health Practitioner has warned us about schistosomiasis, a fluke
disease which results in middle-sized worms invading the skin after one swims in
fresh water, regardless of how clean it may appear. The Guinea worm, a larger
worm, about thirty inches, is present in both fresh and salt water and also can invade
the skin. Cobras and scorpions abound on the campus, so we are very careful to
inspect our shoes and bedsheets. Most animals have not been protected from
rabies, so I am grateful to the Michigan Department of Health in Lansing for my
rabies-prevention shots. I must also take my malaria-prevention pills on a religious
schedule. I would kill for a hot shower and a toilet that will flush. I'm still eating the
American food that I had shipped; when I run out, I will have to chance the wages of
illness by starting on the local foods—fufu, yams, rice balls, and goat chitterlings.
During the last five years, pork has been available to the locals, and it is a big hit; the
fatter the better. Strangely, few people here eat fish.

I doubt that I will be leaving the country for vacations because of the difficulty of
getting multiple reentry visas. Permission must be obtained for all travel. Don't try to
visit here. Moreover, don't send me any gifts unless you want to assist the economy of
the postal employees. I even have trouble obtaining a resident's visa. To apply
means that I have to submit my passport, all photographs, copies of my Fulbright
contract, and a letter from the vice-chancellor of the University. I also have to submit
all these documents to establish a bank account, which I have to do, since American
money can be used only in the black market, and doing that can result in execution
by the government. I have to convert to Ghanian cedis, which have an exchange rate
of 170 to the dollar.

Ghana is a multi-lingual society. English is the language of education, business,
and government, but each of its fourteen major tribes has its own language, which is

spoken in the market...
This will be my last letter from Ghana. I am at a resort known as Bierwa Beach, which is operated by the German Volunteers as a rest stop between Ghana and the Ivory Coast on the West Afrika Highway. Located fifteen miles from the University of Cape Coast, it is one of the most scenic areas in Africa. I am sitting under a royal palm tree on a white sand beach, which is in a crescent-shaped cove. All around me are fishermen in their ocean canoes trying to master the incoming white-capped surf of the Gulf of Guinea. The undertow is too great to permit swimming, but the beach is clean. Most Ghanian beaches are used as toilets, but the Germans and their large Alsatian dogs are efficient in keeping the "natives" from using this section of the beach. The beach restaurant has a national reputation for its German cuisine and beer. I am glad to have this alternative to fu-fu, kinkay, komtumeray, stinkfish, and palm-nut stew.

Young girls and old women are balancing large baskets full of fish on their heads. A crowd of children have surrounded me, attracted by my typewriter. Perhaps they have never seen one or have never seen a "person of color" using one. Some try to sell me lobsters and blue crab—each costing only the equivalent of ten American cents. Adolf the Alsatian barks at and disperses them.

In retrospect, despite the difficulties and dangers, my experience in Ghana has been positive, and I have accomplished all I meant to: establishing a functioning Child Development and Assessment Unit, establishing both the B.Ed. and the M.A. degree programs in Special/Exceptional Education, completing my research into the racial identification and racial preferences of Ghanian children, and forming wonderful relationships with a wide array of Ghanaians and expatriates. Perhaps my most memorable and moving experience occurred when a committee of students met with the Vice-chancellor (the equivalent of an American university president) to demand that immediate negotiations be established with the American Embassy to keep me in residence at the University for another year.