

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

PJW-5
Learning Patience

Ouagadougou, Upper Volta
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

Dear Peter,

Living in Upper Volta -- or, I suspect, in many less industrialized countries -- requires a great deal of patience. I am not by nature a patient person. But living here I am being forced to learn patience -- a virtue I've often admired in other people, but never mastered myself.

Prior to my arrival in Africa, I had visions of how I would begin my fellowship. I would hit the ground running, find a place to live, immerse myself in French, and soon meet lots of people to discuss the local forestry development situation. Shortly after my arrival, I would acquire a car, to go off and visit various parts of the country, before making a decision on where to base my field research. It did not seem unreasonable to assume I would be in the field within three months of my arrival.

As it has turned out, however, things have moved much more slowly. It has taken much longer to get established than I had expected it would. With no existing support systems in country, my husband and I spent our first month here just finding an apartment to rent, negotiating a lease, and getting set up. There were delays in getting money transferred from our bank in the States to our bank here, which subsequently delayed my purchase of a vehicle for my research. Along the way, I lost a month due to illness. Contacting people to talk to about research possibilities has also proved to be more time-consuming than I had originally envisioned.

It isn't just a question of the slower pace at which things happen here, but more a question of entirely different ways in which things happen. Thus I have been learning a whole new way of dealing with social systems. This requires not only patience, but a certain flexibility in approaching a day's activities.

Paula J. Williams is a Forest and Society Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs, studying human uses of forest resources in sub-Saharan Africa.

To begin with, there is the question of the telephone. When we rented our apartment the end of November, we requested a telephone. We have not yet acquired a telephone after over four months of waiting. Probably we will never acquire a telephone before we leave Ouagadougou. People in Ouaga often have to wait a year or more to get a telephone, if they are fortunate enough to be in a section of the city where the telephone lines are not already saturated. (The trick to getting a telephone more rapidly seems to be either to rent lodgings where there already is a telephone, acquired by a previous tenant and retained by the landlord, or to purchase someone else's telephone.)

But since our apartment is located in the center of town, it's only an eight-block walk to the post office and telecommunications building, where there are three pay phones that can be used for local calls. (These are the only public phones I have discovered in town. It is also possible to make telephone calls from business establishments, such as hotels, paying them for the use of their phone.) Often one or more of the phones is out of order or being used, so I have to wait to make my call. What is surprising is that for a city of this size -- roughly a quarter of a million people -- I don't have to wait more often. But probably most of the people who use telephones already have ones of their own.

Having a telephone is not, however, necessarily a blessing, because they don't always work. Recently I tried for several days to call friends, but kept getting a busy signal. Finally I went to their house to talk to them instead -- their phone had been out of order. Now that I have finally acquired a car, this alternative is fairly easy. Until a few weeks ago, whenever I couldn't reach someone on the phone and decided to go to their office instead, I would have to walk off, find a cab, and go there.

When taking a taxi, you never know how long it will take you to go across town. It can take easily half an hour to go a couple of miles, perhaps even longer. One day I must have spent over an hour in a taxi to travel this distance. The driver went to a number of outlying sections of the city to drop off other passengers, including driving back past my original starting point twice, stopped to buy gas, and stopped again a bit farther on to buy a cigarette to smoke. When he finally stopped within a few blocks of my destination -- to pick up another passenger and to buy a meat brochette (shish kebob) to eat -- I decided it would be faster to get out and walk the rest of the way. I had already paid him my fare in advance, so he could buy the gas. I thanked him for the tour of the city and walked off.

Having arrived at the office of the person I wish to talk to, or make an appointment to see, I may or may not find

the person in or available to see me. (Government officials and development workers here are often unavailable, as they are attending conferences, out in the field, or meeting with visiting development experts or people like myself who want information from them.) If the individual is not there, I may be able to leave a message saying I'll stop back again -- not having a telephone, I can't ask the person to call me. Then I have to find a taxi for the return trip. A number of offices are located in parts of town without much traffic, so taxis may be impossible to find. Thus I would end up walking a couple of miles home...At this rate, it can take an entire morning to find out that someone is not at her or his office, so I am unable to make an appointment: that means trying again another morning.

For long-distance calls, the telephone problems are even worse. Often when I ask the telephone clerk to place a long-distance call for me, he'll tell me that the line to that place isn't working. Since it is a technical difficulty, he doesn't know when it will work again. Once I tried a couple of times a day for several days to call Abidjan, but the direct line was out of order. Finally, on a slow Sunday afternoon, when the clerk didn't have much other business, he offered to try to place the call through Paris. He called Paris to ask them to make the call. Forty minutes later, Paris called back -- there was no one at home in Abidjan. The following morning I sent a telegram to Abidjan instead.

These difficulties in reaching people on the telephone encourage not only patience, but flexibility. Since it is difficult to reach someone in advance to make an appointment, I have adopted the strategy of deciding to just go anyway -- even on long-distance trips -- but making sure that I have a "Plan B" of alternative things to do at my destination, if my original "Plan A" falls through.

All the driving around town in taxis or walking afoot has its advantages, too, in learning about local life and attitudes. Walking not only provides good exercise, but a chance to see different parts of the city more slowly. Lots of people are surprised to see me walking around, and talk to me. The taxis that do pass by usually honk, assuming that, of course, I would not want to walk.

One of the more surprising things that I have learned is how the people I meet on the streets tend to make sharp distinctions between "whites" and "Africans". The common perception is that all whites are rich. Comparatively speaking, the average white expatriate here has more money than the average Voltaic. But certainly many whites, such as Peace Corps or European volunteers, live here with less money than do highly-placed Voltaic government officials, African business entrepreneurs, or non-white development experts. Nonethe-

less, white skin seems to be the criterion by which many street sellers or beggars decide to approach me. Some, in fact, even address me as "blanche" or "nasãra", the French and Mooré words, respectively, for "white".

While I do not enjoy being highly visible and receiving all of this attention, I have become more patient in dealing with it. I personally do not believe that race is a relevant category for classifying people's probable actions or possible situations. However, I am well aware that this criterion historically has been, and still is, socially relevant, so I am trying to understand it. For many of these people who gain their living on the streets, it is one means by which they decide upon whom to focus their efforts.

Apparently most of the white expatriates have automobiles, or at least motorbikes, and live in the outlying residential areas, so when they come into the center of town, they drive. The only whites who commonly walk around town are the tourists. Consequently, when I first arrived, many souvenir vendors would descend upon me. Over the months I have gotten to know a number of these street sellers: they now know that I don't buy, so we can chat about other things.

A local batik seller once commented on our lack of a car -- surely we could afford one, as all whites are rich. Not necessarily, we explained, cars here are expensive. But all whites can buy cars duty-free, he replied. Not us, we informed him. His perception of whites is not unfounded, as it appears that the vast majority who live in Ouagadougou work for either the diplomatic corps or development assistance organizations, so they qualify for tax-exempt vehicles, which bear distinctive green license plates.

The local perception of all whites as being comparatively rich means that we are also approached by lots of beggars in the streets. Little children who know no other French know how to say "Je demande dix francs" ("I ask for ten francs"), or "Donnez-moi un cadeau" ("Give me a gift"). If I ask them why, they will explain that they have had nothing to eat yet today. This explanation may or may not be true. It is a standard line spoken by many who beg or sell, regardless of their actual financial circumstances.

One Tuareg acquaintance uses this line all the time, in asking people to buy his leather boxes or swords. He has told us, however, that he has a large herd of livestock, left with his brother in Mali. He has made the hadj (Muslim pilgrimage) to Mecca several times, by airplane, and he wears an expensive digital watch. We suspect his financial circumstances are rather better than he is willing to admit.

For many beggars, their claim of not having eaten yet may indeed be a sincere one. Some children begging, however, only approach white people and do not ask for or receive money from affluent Voltaics (such as our landlord, a local businessman, who drives a bright new Mercedes). If we ask them why this difference in whom they approach, they may come right out and say it is because we are white.

Dealing with bureaucracies here is another way to learn about local attitudes while acquiring patience. Often there are long lines, in government offices, to purchase stamps at the post office, to obtain car registration papers, and the like. I have been wondering if these long lines result from the design of offices to suit government, rather than citizen, needs, or just from a shortage of funds to hire more staff.

In some respects, the systems seem to be set up for government convenience. For example, in applying for certain government documents, such as car registration, a processing or registration fee is charged in the form of government treasury stamps. These stamps are only sold at the National Treasury office in the mornings. So this requires going to the office where you need to submit your paperwork, finding out how much they require in stamps, going off to the Treasury to buy the stamps, and then returning to the original office with the stamps affixed to your papers. This is not an efficient system for the applicants. For the government, the system has the advantage of depositing all the funds in one place, so the individual government offices don't have to handle money. The disadvantage is that government bureaucrats have to deal with the public's repeated trips to their offices.

The question of repeated trips to government offices seems to upset even the Voltaics, who should be used to this situation. When I bought my car, I had to go to the public works office to submit the papers for a change in registration. I was issued a slip of paper with my new license plate number on it, and told to return in four days for a provisional registration certificate. When I return, my papers weren't ready yet. I was advised to come again in another three days. Later, the same story... and again, a week later, again the same...

By my fourth visit, the number of people coming to the office had grown substantially. The government had recently announced that it was introducing a new series of license plate numbers, so everyone would have to get new plates. As people are starting to submit their applications, the office is getting overwhelmed with work. The clerk decided that he would just read off the names of the people whose registration forms were ready. So he read off about fifty names. Only a few people in the crowd of thirty-five had their names called. When he finished, everyone left waiting was told to come back in another week. Lots of people became quite agitated about the further

delay. Although the little slips of paper which serve as receipts for the provisional registrations are valid in lieu of registration papers throughout the country, they are useless outside of Upper Volta. Couldn't the office process papers faster for those who had to travel, one person demanded. No, the clerk replied, there was nothing that could be done. If you wanted, you could take your chances with foreign customs officials. But the office could not process special requests, he said, because then suddenly everyone would have to go outside of the country, and how could the office decide who had legitimate or higher-priority requests?

On the fifth visit, three weeks after my original one, my provisional registration was ready. I was comparatively fortunate. While some people have gotten their papers within a few weeks, others submitted their forms months ago and still have not received their papers. The provisional registration is only good for 90 days, when I'll have to go through this process all over again for an extension, unless my permanent registration is ready by then. But giving the growing number of people submitting their forms, this may not be too likely. At least the clerk has started suggesting that people come back in two-week intervals, instead of every few days to see if their papers are ready.

This strategy of waiting, to reduce the number of trips to an office, sometimes can backfire. After experiencing long lines at the post office, I decided it would be more efficient to go less frequently, when I had several things to mail. One day I went to the post with twelve pieces of mail. It was right after a long holiday weekend, so there were long lines. I had to wait about three-quarters of an hour to get to the window. Then the clerk had to weigh each of my items, look up the rates in his rate book, find stamps of the appropriate denominations, have me verify the total charge, and go off to get change. This whole process took fifteen minutes -- and greatly angered all of the people waiting behind me, most of whom only wanted to buy a single stamp. I have decided that it would be more prudent to only mail three or four items at once on future occasions.

When shopping, though, the best strategy is not to wait, but to buy something you need, or will need, when you see it. Frequently stores do not maintain a large inventory of stock, and deliveries of new stock may be erratic. When a particular item is sold out, it may take a month's wait before it is back on the shelves again. Or the store manager may decide not to restock it. Consequently, it is best to buy something when you see it, as you may not be able to find it again.

Recently I decided that I needed a second lamp for my apartment. The lamp I wanted was no longer in stock in Ouagadougou, but I found one in another store in Bobo-Dioulasso.

The clerk asked me if I wanted a light bulb for it, but I decided to wait and buy my lightbulb in Ouagadougou, rather than risk breaking one on the 220-mile trip back. When I returned to Ouagadougou, I went out to buy a lightbulb. The stores which sell them have a wide range of bulbs in stock, but not the size of bulb I need. Or they have the size, but with a bayonet mounting instead of a screw mounting. Now I have two lamps, but only one lightbulb. I trust that eventually, somewhere, I will be able to find more lightbulbs. Who knows -- maybe they'll still have them in stock when I return to Bobo.

With items generally sold in the open market or on the streets, the supply may be even more erratic. You may not be able to find a particular roving salesperson when you want to. Usually when we have lots of peanuts at home, I will be beseged by young girls trying to sell me peanuts. When I run out of peanuts and go deliberately looking for them, often the peanut girls are nowhere to be found. Within a few days, though, I run across them again. Other goods, such as clothing, are more hit and miss.

We are now into the hot season, with temperatures as high as 113°F. I have decided that I am in need of a cool, sleeveless, cotton dress. But I have been putting off the purchase, because of all that will be involved. Few stores here sell ready-made clothes, expensive and limited in size and selection. Roving vendors sell local batik one-size-fits-all creations. The other alternative is to have a local tailor sew up something for me.

To order a dress from a tailor, I first must get recommendations from acquaintances on tailors, or walk around Ouaga talking to tailors, looking at samples of their work, to decide who might be able to create what I want. Then I will have to venture into the market in search of cloth. There are numerous small stalls with bundles of cloth to look through in search of something appealing. Some merchants specialize in local printed fabrics, others stock predominantly solid-colored fabrics. All of them will put the hard sell on you if you so much as glance in the direction of their stalls, or even if you don't. Should I find something I like, then I will have to decide how much I am willing to pay and ask what the price is. Then the bargaining will begin, with my lower counter-offer. Eventually if we agree on a price and conclude the transaction, then I'll have my cloth and can take it to the tailor. After waiting several days -- voila! -- I'll have my dress.

Just the thought of all this walking around in the heat builds up a sweat. It almost seems simpler to patiently wait for next month's rains to arrive and cool things off. If I do that, however, I'll have to walk around in the mud, unless

I wait until next fall, when things dry out. Either solution is going to require more patience for clothes shopping than I am accustomed to mustering. But of course I will get a hand-made dress in the bargain, made of the cloth and design of my choice.

To be quite honest, while these delays in getting things accomplished no longer surprise me, I sometimes still find them exacerbating. Learning patience is a slow process, and I am still learning.

Sincerely,

Paula J. Williams

Paula J. Williams
Forest and Society Fellow

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