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Voluntourism: Examining the Impact of International Volunteers on Local Communities

Volunteer tourism is a form of alternative tourism gaining popularity in recent years. Organizations are popping up throughout the world to provide opportunities for well meaning individuals to participate in a more humanitarian form of tourism, giving tourists an opportunity to give back to the communities they visit. Usually, participants pay a fee to cover their room, board, and program operation costs and in turn are immersed in local culture and given a work placement. Volunteer work includes teaching in rural schools, care taking in orphanages, assisting doctors in clinics, teaching relevant skills such as computer literacy to locals, constructing homes, and other work depending on the volunteers' skills. I hope to put my First Aid/CPR skills and interest in Medical Anthropology to use with a volunteer placement in Ghana through Volta Aid Foundation. VAF is a Ghanaian based NGO which focuses on addressing the needs of the local communities in Ho and the surrounding Volta region. VAF emphasizes working within the community to meet local needs and provides aid through construction projects, teaching placements, and medical help placements. Through VAF's medical help placement I will assist doctors and nurses in an overcrowded hospital and teach First Aid workshops to provide locals with potentially life saving skills. However, as an Anthropology major, I have an intellectual concern with the impacts that volunteer tourism has on the local culture.

The idea of volunteer tourism is a noble activity whose theoretical benefits include cross-cultural communication, alleviating poverty, community building, and stimulating local

economies. However, the reality of volunteer tourists' work is often less noble than their intentions. In some cases, international volunteer work causes more harm than good. National Geographic put it best in stating, "helping" is not always helpful" (Schott, 2010). If volunteer tourists are not careful, they may negatively impact communities they intend to help through "a neglect of locals' desires, a hindering of work progress and completion of unsatisfactory work, a disruption of local economies, a reinforcement of conceptualizations of the "other" and rationalizations of poverty, and an instigation of cultural changes" (Wiley, 2009). Unfortunately, many well meaning volunteer tourists see their work as inherently beneficial and do not consider the possible negative impacts of their presence on local communities. The benefits of volunteering abroad on the impacted communities are far from inherent. As the authors of the book *Alternatives to the Peace Corps* articulate,

"While a volunteer may wish to feed the hungry, heal the sick, or house the homeless, these social and political problems are often more complex than they may seem. Thus, the volunteer's most appropriate role is that of a student. Working abroad can better [students'] understanding of the world and forces that keep people impoverished, and enhance [students'] appreciation of the richness of other cultures." (Powell, 2001).

With my Venture Grant, I will utilize ethnographic research methods of participant-observation and interviews to gain a better understanding of Ghanaian culture, medical attitudes, levels of health, and how these factors are affected by VAF. Through casual interviews with local medical professionals and Volta Aid Foundation employees (sample questions in Appendix A), I hope to begin to measure the impacts, positive and negative, of VAF volunteers' work in the region. I have already received IRB approval to conduct these interviews and VAF has

agreed to let me conduct my independent research while volunteering on a Medical Help placement (Appendix B). To provide a cultural context for information gathered through my interviews, I will make use of participant-observation research methods. Through VAF's medical help program, I will be able to work side by side with nurses and doctors and carefully observe how they interact with patients, delivering Western style medicine in a non-Western culture. My placement within the hospital in Ho will change on a weekly basis to fit immediate needs and will give me an opportunity to work with and observe many different medical professionals. In addition, I plan to observe the behavior of the VAF professionals and their relationship with the local people and culture. That is, do VAF members have a cultural colonialist role or a facilitator role, working with the needs of the community? Additionally, I will play the role of participant-observer by living within the local community. I will be housed with a Ghanaian host family during my stay ensuring immersion within Ghanaian society and enabling me to paint a more vivid picture of Ghanaian culture.

Nicholas Kristof, of the New York Times and author of *Half the Sky* (2010), stresses "the need to listen to local people rather than just issue instructions" (Kristof, 2011) This is because the most effective international aid is not the kind which makes locals dependent upon foreign investment but which empowers them to lift themselves out of poverty or oppression. Based on these standards, the Ghanaian based Volta Aid Foundation appears to be an exemplary program in international aid. It was founded by Ashley Bulgarelli, an Australian native who came to Ghana in 2009 to volunteer with one of the many agencies working in the region. Dissatisfied with the ineffective approach of the organization, Ashley broke off and began his own. His emphasis has been on local empowerment and sustainably addressing local needs through small

scale development. VAF keeps operational costs low by housing volunteers with local host families and Ashley does not take pay from his organization to ensure that the optimum amount of dollars go into the projects and community. The organization is a registered NGO with the Registrar General Department, Social Welfare and the Local Government of the Volta region (Botey, 2012). With my Venture Grant, I hope to gain an understanding of the impact of this particular organization on local communities in the Volta region of Ghana.

This case study will help me to better understand the cultural role of international volunteer programs and community development projects. In addition, I plan to combine this cultural data with my interest in medicine to better understand Medical Anthropology in practice, to develop my Honors Thesis in Anthropology, and to make more informed career path choices after graduation. The results of my independent research in Ghana will enrich the College community in several ways. My results will influence my outlook and provide a unique perspective in class discussions in my classes in Anthropology, Philosophy, Sociology, and other disciplines. I also plan to have a College wide presentation in the Anthropology department to share my fieldwork experiences and results. I am committed to studying the role international volunteers play in addressing global health problems and the broader impacts they have on local communities. Hopefully, after learning about my experiences, my background research, my cultural interpretations, and my case study results, other students will be able to make more informed decisions on volunteering abroad. Thank you for considering my proposal.

Budget

Plane ticket from Chicago to Accra, Ghana (Cheapest flight found for 7/13/12 - 7/19/12 on kayak.com)	1182*
5 week Medical Help Volunteer placement with Volta Aid Foundation	650*

(includes 5 week homestay with full board and clean drinking water)

Mosquito Net	10
White Lab Coat	10
Single Entry Visa	<u>60</u>
Total (excl. local transportation, extra living expenses, and return airfare)	1912
Total requested Venture Grant Funds:	\$1000
Total requested President's Special Projects Funds:	\$500
Total requested Anthropology Department Funds:	\$200
Personal resources	\$212+

Note: the budget only includes one-way airfare to Ghana because I intend to study abroad fall 2012 following my summer 2012 research in Ghana. I intend to study abroad in Bamako, Mali through SIT's Mali: Health, Gender, and Community Empowerment program. My backup program is SIT's India: Health and Human Rights program.

*prices changed to reflect increase in price of flights and placement

Appendix A. Sample Interview Questions

1. Are you healthy? What does the word healthy mean to you? What does the word healthy mean to most of your patients? (medical professionals only)
2. Has Volta Aid Foundation improved your health? How has Volta Aid Foundation improved the health of the community?
3. How else has Volta Aid Foundation impacted the local community? Has the organization altered your day to day life?
4. Do you consider Volta Aid Foundation to be a part of the local community? Do Volta Aid Foundation and its volunteers share the values of the community? Do they impose any new values on the community?
5. What changes have you seen in the community since the creation of Volta Aid Foundation?
6. Has Volta Aid Foundation negatively impacted the community?
7. Is biomedicine stigmatized or favored compared to traditional health practices in the Volta region? Are Ghanaians likely to demand answers from doctors or self-diagnose? Do Ghanaians question what doctors say or accept diagnoses and prescriptions unconditionally?

8. Is healthcare universally accessible? Does Volta Aid Foundation improve accessibility?
9. Are there sufficient healthcare services and resources to meet the healthcare needs of the area? If not, how do you prioritize demands for your healthcare services? (medical professionals only)
10. Are there disparities between health values of local Ghanians, international volunteers, and Volta Aid Foundation?
11. Is the type of healthcare delivered by Volta Aid Foundation in line with or contradictory to local beliefs, values, and lifestyles?
12. In what ways does Volta Aid Foundation attempt to work within local culture rather than against it?
13. Are there ways Volta Aid Foundation could change their practices to better fit local culture?


Appendix B. Volta Aid Foundation Contact Information and Documentation

Volta Aid Foundation contact: Eric Botey

Email: info@voltaaidfoundation.org

Phone: 233 020 844 2407

Email confirming Medical Help placement on Dec 5, 2011:

From: Volta Aid Foundation
Subject: RE: VoltaAidFoundation.org - Volunteer Application
Date: December 5, 2011 10:15:25 AM MST
To: Ruth Markwardt <ruthie12189121@gmail.com>
▶  1 Attachment, 25.7 KB

Hello Ruth,

Thank you for the message. For medical help positions you will be working at one of the hospitals in Ho and assigned to a different ward every week where you will be assisting the nurses in their daily routine. You will get to move around and see all the different departments of the hospital. You will be observing a wide range of procedures, assisting doctors and nurses, and learning more about a developing countries health system. You will not have free reign to move and work as you wish, for obvious reasons, but it is a great opportunity to get involved in some real hands-on work. This position does include observation and basic work but from past feedback volunteers have said that you get more involved here than you could ever hope to get in a hospital back home without being an actual nurse. This program offers a great insight into local life and local health issues.

Before you travel to Ghana you must purchase travel insurance, apply for a visa at your nearest Ghanaian embassy, and visit your local travel clinic/doctor and receive appropriate vaccinations. A yellow fever vaccination is a requirement of entry into Ghana and malaria prophylaxis is essential as malaria is rife countrywide. You will require other vaccinations but these depend on your previous history and current outbreaks but you should discuss this with your travel doctor/clinic. They know best.

I hope this helps and I have also attached a file to this email that provides more information. Please let me know your thoughts and I await your reply!

Best wishes,

Eric Botey
Project Officer
Volta Aid Foundation

Confirmed permission to conduct interviews on Jan 23, 2012:

From: Volta Aid Foundation
Subject: RE: Resume
Date: January 23, 2012 4:02:31 AM MST
To: Ruth Markwardt <ruthie12189121@gmail.com>

Dear Ruth,

How do you do? It is great to hear from you and thank you for the information.

Yes you are free to interview someone like me :) and that the hospital staffs will also be of a great value to your interviews and they will be responsive as well.

Any information I may need, I will ask for it and so if you have any more questions, do ask then.

Thank you once again and stay out of trouble.

Smiles,

Eric.

I have not made contact with the medical professionals I intend to interview yet because I will not receive my official placements until I arrive in Ghana.

Appendix C. Reading List

Addae, S. *History of Western Medicine in Ghana*. Durham Press, 1996. Print.

- Banerjee, Abhijit. *Poor Economics: a Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*. PublicAffairs, 2011. Print.
- Bigby, JudyAnn. *Cross-Cultural Medicine*. American College of Physicians, 2003. Print.
- Easterly, William. *The White Man's Burden*. Penguin, 2007. Print.
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- McGillivray, Mark. "Is Aid Effective?" *OECD* Aug 2004. Web.
- Moyo, Dambisa. *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009. Print.
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Takyi, W. *Socio-cultural Influence on Choice of Biomedicine - Western Style Medicine - Versus Traditional Medicine in Ghana*. University of Surrey, 2006. PDF.

Tsey, Komla. "Traditional Medicine in Contemporary Ghana: a Public Policy Analysis." *Social Science and Medicine* Vol 45 Issue 7 (2009): 1065-74. PDF.

Twumasi, Patrick. "Colonialism and International Health: a Study in Social Change in Ghana." *Social Science and Medicine Part B: Medical Anthropology* Vol 15 Issue 2 (1981): 147-51. PDF.

Appendix D. Relevant Coursework

Classes I will take before conducting my research in Ghana to prepare for this experience include AN105: Language and Culture and AN380: Community Based Field Course. Language and Culture will give me further experience using participant observation and interview field methods. Additionally it will give me frameworks with which to compare the use of language between groups I will study. The

Community Based Field Course taught by Krista Fish will equip me with research methodologies and experience working with human subjects. Professor Fish and I intend to study health issues in an African refugee population in Denver through interviews and basic physical measurements

I gained experience interviewing human subjects and compiling interview data in AN202: Human Biological Variation. In this study, I worked with a group of students to gather information on romantic attraction patterns between students on our campus. We interviewed couples to gather information on their physical traits and determine if positive assortative mating was occurring at a statistically significant rate. I also have research experience with nonhuman primates and other mammals. I worked collaboratively in AN308: Human and Nonhuman Primate Life Histories with a group to collect data on Denver Zoo animal populations. In a separate research project through AN101: Biological Anthropology, I worked individually to collect data on gorilla at the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo to explore the effects of captivity on their behavioral patterns compared to wild gorilla. In each nonhuman primate research project, I collected data by conducting focal follows and group scans. These research methods are similar in principle to the detailed observations I will be making as a participant-observer in Ghana. Additionally, my studies in AN105: Cultural Anthropology introduced me to methodologies of interviews and participant-observation and theoretical frameworks such as cultural relativism, critical cultural relativism, and cultural imperialism which will enable me to interact with Ghanaian culture in a respectful, informative manner.

Appendix E. Works Cited

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