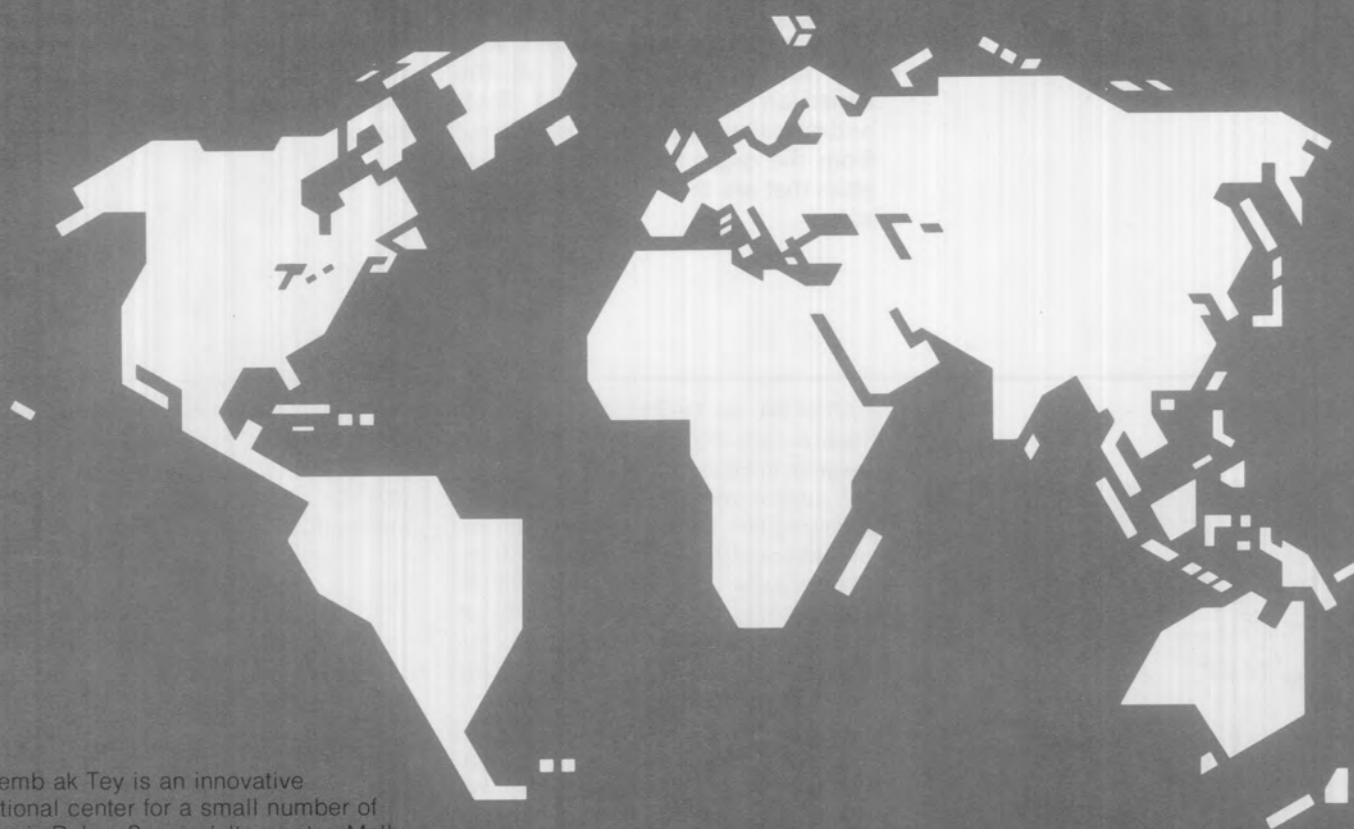


THE DEMB AK TEY RESOURCE CENTER

by Barbara Harrell-Bond



The Demb ak Tey is an innovative educational center for a small number of children in Dakar, Senegal. Its creator, Molly Melching, and Bollé M'Baye run it on a shoestring, and their success indicates the potential for wider application of the model.

[BHB-6-'81]

ISSN 0161-0724

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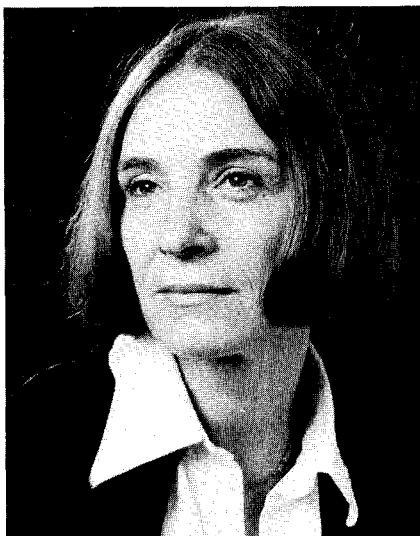
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We* became interested in visiting Demb ak Tey Center (*Demb ak Tey* is Wolof for "yesterday and tomorrow") because it was described—quite inaccurately as it turned out—as a place where "an American woman is working for the Senegalese government teaching urban slum children in Dakar about African culture." The address? "Somewhere near the Grand Mosque in Medina. You can't miss it, you will hear the children singing."

It was not all that easy to find, but one day we did finally hear the children. We were directed up a rather dark stairway to a door on the first floor by a couple of dozen youngsters, who were standing outside. We knocked; it was a few minutes before someone opened the door just a crack. Molly Melching, the young American woman who began the center, had been warned that we might be visiting, so we were allowed inside, but the children who had led us up the stairs had to return to the street below to listen to all the fun going on inside because the two small rooms that house these activities were already far too crowded.

How the Center Began

Molly Melching, whose interest in Africa had been prompted by studies of French literature, came to the University of Dakar to read for a Master's degree in African literature. She had always wanted to work

with children and in Dakar she began doing so on an informal basis. Knowing how children love being read to, she started looking for materials. As she put it, "The first thing I noticed was that I couldn't find any published stories that were adapted to Senegalese children. They were all French books which had little to do with life of a Senegalese child. Although the children liked to be read to, even these stories, I found that they had a lot of trouble [in understanding]. They didn't seem to be too enthusiastic about them."

Molly began looking around at the materials which were used in the schools in Dakar. Although Senegal has been independent for nearly 20 years, many were stories such as *Snow White* and the Seven Dwarfs, *Cinderella*, and the like. The situation Molly found in Senegal is similar to that found in most African countries. The educational system imposed by the colonizers as part of their "civilizing" mission was not merely alien and insensitive to the local culture, it was positively antagonistic. The structure of colonial education remains largely intact in Africa. In Senegal, for example, French is the official language, although Wolof (one of five major languages) is the most widely spoken, and children are discouraged from speaking Wolof in schools. Only recently has significant progress been made toward the standardization of Wolof, and there are few written materials in the language.

Most children's story books are imported from France, are written in French, and are intended for French children. As can be imagined, the

Senegalese child has difficulty relating to the illustrations and subject matter of books which do not address the cultural and social realities of Senegal. When the pictures show a rosy-cheeked, blonde French girl learning to ride the metro in Paris, or going to visit her grandmother's farm in a French province, Molly points out, it is not surprising that the Senegalese child is not motivated to read the story. Moreover, Molly discovered that even some of the materials written for children by African authors reflected European ideas. One such book, for example, had a picture of a village with a church. When she asked the children about this building, none of them knew what it was. Senegal, after all, is a country where most people are Muslim; only a tiny minority are Christian.

So Molly decided to write and illustrate a story for the children with whom she worked. The story, *Anniko*, was published by Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, a West African publishing house. Since one member of the committee which reviewed her manuscript for the publisher also worked at the Centre d'Etude des Civilisations (Center for Civilization Studies) in the Ministry of Culture, Molly was asked if she would try to find a way to stay on in Senegal after completing her studies at the university to work with them in developing more culturally sensitive literature for Senegalese children. Funding for three years was obtained from the U.S. Peace Corps.

Molly began her work by using books with African themes donated by publishers, mostly from France and the United States. She told

*Throughout this *Report* I refer to "we" when describing observations of the center. I traveled with Ms. Olivia Jamin who conducted the interview with Bollé M'Baye in French and translated it. I am grateful to her for help as well in planning the *Report*.

Molly, telling a story.

Below, a youthful observer with her charge.

these stories to children in Wolof, which she speaks fluently. If the children responded to a story, the text was translated into Wolof and pasted over the print so that the children could eventually read the story for themselves. This process was extremely painstaking. After the children had "approved" a particular book, Molly consulted adults to ask what they thought of it. If they approved of the material, she translated it from English to French and from French to Wolof (necessary because most people who are involved in the work of developing an orthography for Wolof are fluent in French, but not English). After a good translation was done, she then had it corrected by at least five other people to make sure the Wolof was correct.

I started working on this material and I realized that if you are going to develop material, you need a place where children can come, where you can work on your own material and...[where you can test] material that has already been developed and see how it works, see what the children respond to, and just sit around with the kids and see what they like. Read to them, let them make up stories, and let them tell you what their environment is like. Go to the villages—not just to Dakar, but to the villages too.

Rooms for a center were made available in Medina, a crowded section of downtown Dakar, by the African Cultural Center. Molly used a \$200 donation from UNICEF to buy paint for the walls. In 1977, the Demba ak Tey Center for Children was opened and youngsters from the neighborhood began dropping in to hear stories read in Wolof, their own language. Later Molly was joined by a Senegalese, Bollé M'Baye, who just "turned up," she says, and offered his services as a volunteer.

He wanted to work with children. He was an actor. He had just gotten out of drama school. So I told him fine, since anyone who comes here is welcome to come and volunteer. He came every day for eight months without being paid.... And he was very involved in everything, very dedicated and really loved it...when



he came everything really changed because he is very, very good with traditions. He knows about them; he is from a village and his Wolof is beautiful. He always speaks to the children in very good Wolof without French words (We always try to encourage them to use Wolof and when they give us a French word, we ask them what is the word in Wolof and we try to find it together). And so his stay here was a big turning point for the center. He also knows lots of stories.

From this very modest beginning, a very remarkable program developed. The story is best told by Molly Melching and Bollé M'Baye. While neither of the two formally studied early childhood development, educational psychology, or the like, they both have a clear understanding of the importance of grounding learning in a child's own cultural heritage. They have dramatically demonstrated the enormous store of creativity that may be released when children are provided with such a sympathetic environment. For readers outside Africa this *Report* will provide an opportunity to learn something about the needs and problems of contemporary urban Africans. The center's experience might also become a model for similar efforts in other cultural settings.

Demb ak Tey's Program

In the beginning, Molly thought of Demb ak Tey as simply a place where she could try out various reading materials on children who happened to come in to listen. Although some of the children in the neighborhood attend school and have learned to read in French, many others have had no opportunity to go to school. None had ever learned to read his own language. Bollé told us,

We noticed that books at school are in French, which means that children who are not at school can only look at the pictures in the books. We knew it would be more interesting for them if they could read as well as look at the pictures. We saw that the children were very excited about reading. We use games as a technique because all over the world, a child is a child. You must interest him and you must be interesting. Thus we created a game. We made a lot of letters and

we did some pictures of day-to-day objects which the children knew. We would tell them, here are some letters, and you must choose and try to write what you say. Of course, at the beginning, they made a lot of mistakes, but later on they succeeded in being able to write Wolof word for word. The children were very very interested in this and they were very enthusiastic. We found that after only a few weeks many of the children had succeeded in reading small texts.

And since part of the program was to further the development of a written Wolof vocabulary, the children sensed that they were also contributing to this process.

Anyone who comes is welcome. Although it might have been easier if the ages of the children who attend the center had been limited to those between 5 and 10, Molly found this impossible. They usually stop coming at about 15; children as young as 3 attend. Some of the little girls have responsibility for younger children and bring them along, tied to their backs. (It turned out there are advantages in having children of different ages. Some of the older children who had been to school were able to learn to read Wolof quickly and very soon became interested in helping those who, never having been to school, were just beginning to read.)

Molly vehemently opposes use of the word "school" to describe the center, yet we found more than 40 children sitting around the rooms of the center poring over books with Wolof texts. She explained:

We don't pretend to be a school. We are not teaching [but] we find that the children are learning. They can sit here and read a whole book in Wolof. That is my philosophy of education, that you never teach children anything but that they learn because they want to learn. What you have to do is to stimulate them. If they see these books and they can relate to them, if the books are funny and they laugh, if the books are about things which they know, then they are going to go on to other things, even if they have to do it themselves. They are going to ask questions and that I think is the time when they really learn.

Bollé added:

...there are some children who want to copy exactly what I do. Sometimes they will choose a story and I hear them say, "Ha! Here we are, I am going to tell you a story. I will start from this story I have just read. I am going to tell it to you. Of course, I am not going to tell you how it happens exactly, but I will add something." So [the child] invents something that he adds to the story. He follows a certain part of the story and after that the children clap. At the moment I am happy. It is working well. But at the same time I say to myself, "Careful. I must be careful because that child has just warned me of something." He just taught me what I must do, what steps I must take. I must not lead the children into the wrong path because I now see what kind of responsibility I have towards them. If they go as far as trying to copy exactly what I do, it is because I have a lot of influence. Instead of being the teacher at this point, I am the one who is the pupil. That is why I feel enthusiastic about working with them. Now while teaching them, I am being taught.

The skills of the children are used in other ways as well, as Bollé describes:

We do weaving. It is because of this young child from Mali. One day he told us how he had learned to weave in Mali and we asked if he would like to help the other children profit from his experience. So we bought the necessary materials, he came and he showed the other children.

The center is not open every day. Molly explains:

This is the biggest problem. There are only two of us for the center and we have all these different activities.... Anyway, if we opened it on a regular basis there would be too many children. We just could not accommodate them all. There would be 80 kids here every day. You notice there are only three little girls here now, the rest of them are at home helping their mothers with the cooking. They will come in the afternoon. Like I said, some days we have 80, some days we have 40, yesterday we had only 10. It is because we don't tell them whether it is open. They have to come and look to see if the door is open.

Bollé sees the activities with the children as a means of inculcating an appreciation of their own culture and of helping them deal with the modern world as well.

I explain to them that to know oneself is to know one's origins and to know the past of one's parents—how one's parents and grandparents lived in order to take some profit out of their lives. In fact,

everything is not positive in the past, but we must not also exclude what is good. We must use what is good in the present with what is good from the past in order to "make two arms" and go forward. There is a Wolof proverb which makes this point: he who rejects his traditions may find himself being deceived by other traditions. I think that it is rather paradoxical that a child knows everything about the modern

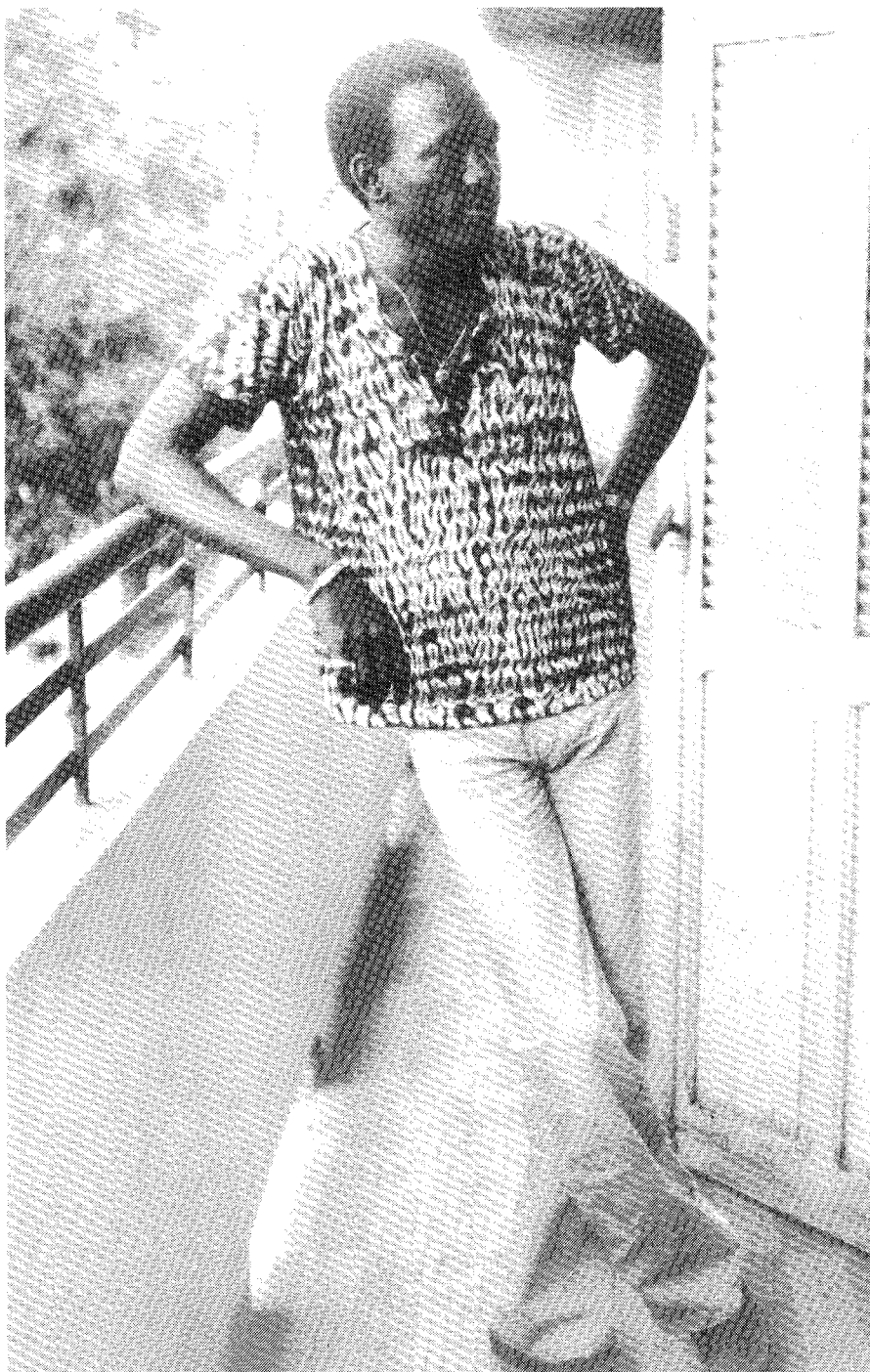
culture and nothing about his own. Of course, these are the effects of school. I am not saying that it is all negative, but in any case I find that lots of children here who have gone to school have no problem speaking about the history of France or the history of another part of the world, but when asked a question such as "My child, how did your parents live?" they look at you open-mouthed and cannot answer.

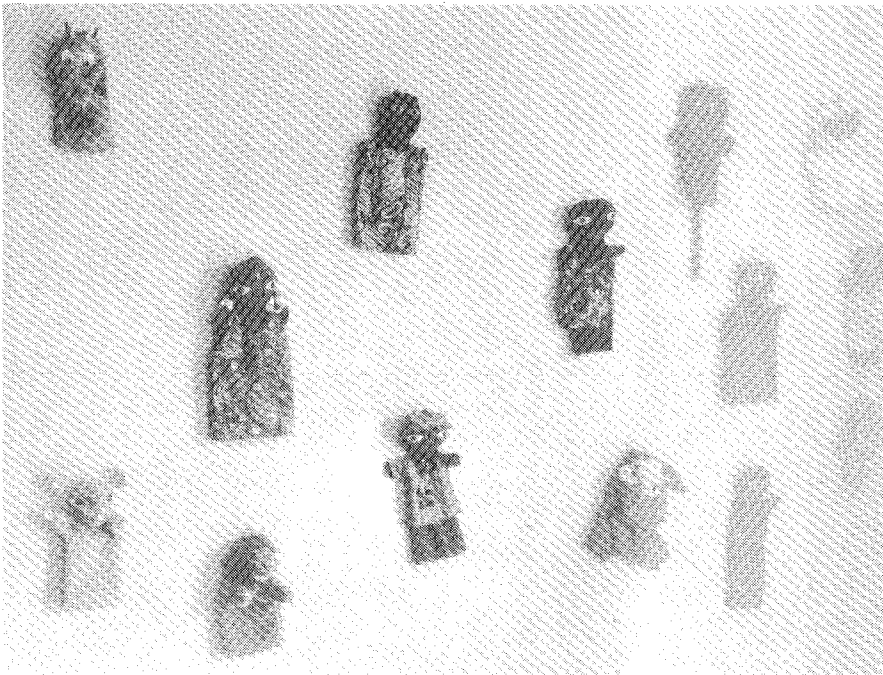
So I told myself it is not their fault, but we must help them to know themselves. So I talk to them about traditional heroes, the social life and the activities of our parents. We talk to them about different regions of the country, the geography of the country, the national resources. We also talk about neighboring countries and of Africa in general. We talk about the history of Africa because, while they must know about themselves, they must not ignore others because one day they might leave here and go somewhere else. Culture is universal, we must know one another and not ignore others.... First we let them read and then, as I am the storyteller, I see either a book or a picture they are interested in and invent a story. I always do it so that at the end of the story there is a moral. As I was saying, to help the children, we must give them a glimpse of life and thus encourage them to be better, to have a positive outlook on the future. I try to find a moral about helping one another, education, social problems, love of work, or how a child must behave with his elders or with other children. Later I ask questions to see if they have perceived, if they have followed the line of the story.

I asked Molly about discipline. How did they manage to work with so many children in such small rooms?

We noticed that we used to be a bit up tight about what we did. We would always want to have activities organized, to know exactly what we were going to do and have it all planned out. Now we have become more spontaneous. We would worry about them having to read too long because they might get bored and uninterested. Now we find that we can let them read for a very long time because they have improved so much since we began.

Bollé M'Baye.





Hand puppets are fashioned from any available materials.

I asked Molly how the children would be behaving if she and I were sitting outside in the hall having our conversation.

Oh! The same. They are very good. We have almost no trouble or discipline problems. The only discipline problem we have are—well, for example, last Friday we had musicians and there were 80 kids and it was really hot in here. The kids wanted to take off their tops and it got a little difficult because it is so small. But other than that they are very good and...well, if I tell them now to go and do a theater, they will go out and do a theater for you, they will just do it spontaneously. What we did was to start with books, the books over there, and then we would have them do theater. We helped them with that and gave them some idea of the structure of theater and then we would tell them to go out and make up one of their own. In theater you get the most incredible themes coming out.... You know, robbers, and people who come to Dakar from the village and the problems they have. Seeing these little kids doing it is very strange, but that is often what is in their environment. What we try to do is to give them a combination of both: allow them to express that because they feel it, they see it, and obviously want to express it, but also try to get them to do things which bring out the moral which we

want to develop. So we try to have a combination of structured theater and free theater.

I asked Molly to describe a usual day at the center.

What we do lots of times—they will come and read like this for an hour. Then Bollé will tell a story and then we will sing songs from the story. Afterwards they will either do the story through theater or else they will use the puppets, but in some way they will animate the story. For example, the story in my book, Anniko, is about a group of strange people with long necks. After we read the story, we said, "Well, these people are kind of weird and different. Now you draw people who are weird and different." The results were quite interesting.

The children make puppets and paint and color. Bollé describes how they taught the principles of color-mixing.

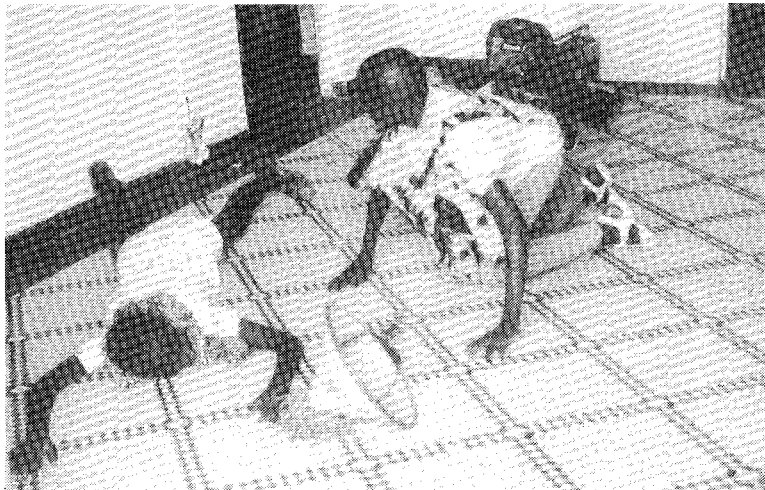
I used a story about a little blue spot and a little yellow spot. They liked one another so much they became one spot, a green one. The children loved this, they thought it was great. After this the children became very interested in mixing colors and drawing. They draw huts, houses, fields and things out of their day-to-day life. They also draw shepherds and workers in the fields. We give them freedom to draw what they

want. Sometimes we see that a child has special talent and we must help him because we never know, one day he could become a painter or a sculptor.

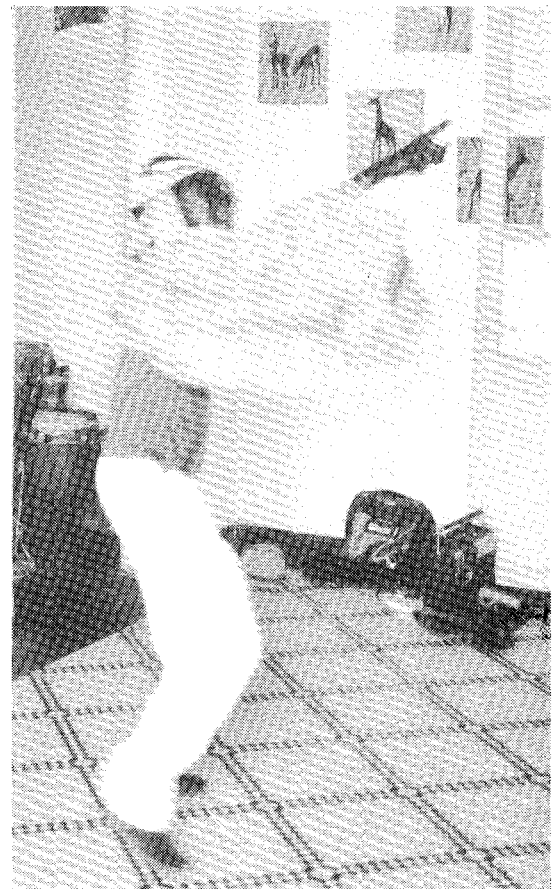
As for the puppets, Molly points out that they try to keep them as simple as possible. They are modeled after traditional Senegalese dolls made in the villages. The children got bits of wood and using donated paper and other scraps made different traditional characters. Three stories were chosen and the children performed a puppet theater which has been shown on television. This publicity increased interest in the center and in educative possibilities for the use of puppets, and now such puppets are being adopted by people working in health education in rural areas. Molly and Bollé are frequently called on to give lectures on how the puppets can be used to enliven educational presentations for people of all ages.

Writers and artists have been encouraged to take advantage of Demb ak Tey as a place to bring their materials to test the response of children. Molly finds these people are encouraged by coming to the center and seeing the children reacting to books. "They get some idea of what children like best and it makes them feel their work will be appreciated."

Before we left the center that day, the children "did theater" for us. Several went out of the room to plan the drama. Bits of cloth and other things at hand were used for costumes. The play was entitled "The Tale of the False Marabout." (A marabout is someone with knowledge of the Koran, who, since he also has the ability to divine, people consult to find lost or stolen items.) We and the other children watched spellbound as the story was enacted of two farmers who labored in their fields only to have their crops stolen. It was the farmers, not the marabout, who actually identified the thieves. The marabout was only interested in getting money from the farmers for his divining. The drama ended with the chief hearing the case before the entire village. He sentenced the thieves to work in the fields to repay



"The False Marabout," a play invented by the children for our entertainment (counterclockwise): farmers plant their fields; their crops have been stolen; the marabout receives the message of who has stolen the crops; the false marabout dramatically announces the name of the thief.



the farmers and to earn their own food so that they would not have to steal to eat.

Both Bollé and Molly are keen to help the children think creatively and realistically about their futures. At first the children's career aspirations were limited to professions which require a great deal of education (law, medicine, teaching, or flying planes), careers inaccessible to most urban African children. As Bollé explains,

I told them that there are many things which a man can do apart from those things which come to those who can go to school. In fact, as I pointed out to them, a long time ago school was not a common thing. What were the activities of our parents? They were artisans, farmers, fishermen. They worked the earth or with wool; others were weavers or blacksmiths. Working as a doctor or as a pilot or as a professor is not more worthy than working as an artisan like my grandfather. The most important thing is to like one's work. As soon as we like what we are doing, we find what I would call some kind of kingdom. We feel like kings because the work is well done, the author of the work is proud of it.

He went on to explain to us how the children are often embarrassed to talk about their parents' occupations because certain professions, such as blacksmith, are associated with inferior caste-like social relations in Senegal. But he told the children how fathers who did these kinds of jobs were able to feed their families, and how that was a noble thing. Now he finds that children, when asked what profession they wish to enter, might say, "I want to be a cultivator, to work in the fields, because I want to work to be able to feed my family."

I ask them questions about the communal life of the village. I say, for example, that in the village the weaver is essential because I clothe myself—thanks to the weaver. And there I see that they have perceived something of what I wanted to teach them.... In this center, no real teaching goes on as such. We want to awaken them, because we have seen that there is something sleeping in them. They do have a feeling for work, but we must help them to "exteriorize" this.

Bollé was asked if the children ever reveal through their creative activities that they suffer psychological problems.

Well, that comes out most in theater... sometimes they do act out exactly what they are living at home. For example, the orphan who is beaten by his stepmother, or the child whose parents live in very poor conditions. It even surprises me sometimes because although they don't say it, I know that this child is acting out exactly what he lives, what he is experiencing at home. Every time that happens, every time something negative comes out, I try to find another point in the play, still in the same context, which can be made positive. For example, the orphan child who is being maltreated always has to do very hard work for his stepmother. I open a discussion with the children. I tell them "But this orphan, how do you see him? He is unhappy, he is this and that, but I say to them, he can be happy. In fact, I think he is happy because although he is an orphan, did you see while he was working [in the play], he was singing beautiful songs? That is because he likes what he is doing and knows that he can become someone. I saw that at one point in the play he had overcome all his sufferings. This work, this suffering, all these things that could be a calvary for him; at one point I saw that for him it became a game because he was not waiting for his stepmother to push him to do the shopping, the washing, but at one point, it was he, by himself, who went to do this work. This means that he has learned to like it, and it helps to like what you are doing." I also say to them, "This child, he is courageous. But why does he have courage? Because he has told himself, 'I do this because I am still a child, but I must do this because although it is very hard it will help me in my life. If I cannot do any hard work in life, when I am an adult, I will be unhappy.'"

Now this child who was sitting in his corner, who was frustrated by the play because the play represented his daily experience, he becomes aware of his own worth. He starts to open up with the others.

The Radio Program

The early priority of the center was to simply get children's reading materials translated into Wolof, but

gradually the work has evolved so that now its main thrust is the collection of existing Senegalese stories. Molly and Bollé work with several others in the collection of oral literature in the villages. Some make videotapes of traditions and games, and the Centre d'Etude des Civilisations produces a magazine in Wolof, *Demb ak Tey*, which also publishes stories, games, riddles, and songs for children. Out of these combined efforts has come a weekly radio program for which Bollé has the main responsibility. This program reaches, as Molly put it, "everybody in Senegal. We know that everyone listens to it because when we go to the villages [to collect material] everyone knows it, talks about it, and comments on it." Molly describes how the program is produced.

*It is a set program. We always tell a story, then discuss it. Usually it is a traditional Wolof story. We often have the hare [as a character] in Senegalese stories, so we usually include one because the kids love them. Bollé does all the characterization. It was his idea even to have the program. He organizes it every week. He will talk about Senegal. We have another part of the program devoted to "know your country" and we do different things. Sometimes we "take" the children to a region, talk about the place, then they will sing a song in that language. This radio program is called *Gééwu Demb ak Tey*, the circle of yesterday and today. The circle refers to the way children gathered around their grandmothers to hear songs, riddles, proverbs, and stories.*

Molly explained how they collected material for one program in a village.

We interviewed a shepherd boy. He told us what he did during the day. And he had made his own flute. He told us how he made the flute and he played a tune for us. We are able to record all of this because the Catholic Relief Services have provided us with a reel-to-reel tape recorder. Then we talked to the oldest people in the village. We asked them about the history of the village and they told us how it was founded and where its name came from. Then the children sang. Then a man sang and explained that his song was a children's game. We are trying to do this as much as possible now, going

to villages in each region, talking about that region, about its history, as well as bringing in the cultural elements and occupations of the people for the children to learn about. We are starting a series about traditional workers. The kids prepare the interviews.

Molly told how they had done a series of three interviews with fishermen. Before going by public transport out to the coast to meet the fishermen, the children decided what questions they would ask. The first interview did not go too well because they forgot their list of questions. So for the second interview they divided up the questions among them, so that each child would need to remember just one question.

They ask unsophisticated questions like "When you go out, do you get dizzy in the boat?" But then they also asked the fisherman if he would tell them all the names of the fish in Wolof. They also asked for the Wolof names of the materials which the fisherman uses. Then one little girl asked "Was his father a fisherman, and would his son be a fisherman?" It was like asking "Is this an inherited occupation," but the way the kids asked the questions is really nice. That is one of the things that I enjoy the most.... They do everything, you know. One person will take charge and say, "Well, here we are with the Director General..." and they love it. We try to give them as much responsibility as possible. We take them on excursions to different places. I have taken them to the Insect Control Center where they showed films to them. They were English films but the sound was cut off, and the man who works there told the story in Wolof. The children learned all the vocabulary for insect control.

Evidence of success in promoting appreciation of the Wolof language is illustrated in the children's selection of interviews for a radio broadcast. After the three fishermen were interviewed, the children returned to the Center to decide which interview to use: they chose that of the fisherman whom the children deemed had spoken "the best Wolof, he hardly used any French words." Other evidence of the success of the radio broadcast comes from the many letters people

write. They come from butchers, market people, teachers, small traders and, of course, from children. The listeners are often asked to go talk to the old people in their village to learn more about some cultural hero or some event in Senegalese history. As a result, many adults say that they *must* listen each week in order to know what questions the children in their village are going to be asking them!

Support for the Center

As noted earlier, the center began with only the provision of rooms and a donation of \$200. Molly's three years' support from the Peace Corps has ended. Since then she has been surviving on a small grant from the Senghor Foundation and some help from the Ministry of Culture, although other foundations have expressed interest in providing her with a salary. Only recently has the Ministry of Culture had made available a full-time salary to enable Bollé to continue his work with the center program. The books first used were provided free of charge by the publishers and other needed materials have been donated. But Molly doesn't see such meager financing as a particular disadvantage.

...we have operated on almost nothing for three years and of course, that limits us. But I think it has been good because my feeling is that a lot of projects don't succeed if they start out with a lot of money and people don't know exactly what their needs will be. I really like the fact that it has grown very, very slowly. I have made lots of mistakes but I feel it is much more solid because we have not been afraid to make mistakes.

Another reason Molly believes it important for such a program to be established as economically as possible is that one of the next priorities is expanding the center to the regions:

We have worked with almost no money here, partly because I think we should work slowly, but also because I wanted to start something, an idea which could be used where there is no money.

The most important problem as far as resources are concerned is finding more people who are willing to work as volunteers.

We try to get as many people participating as possible. We try to encourage participation. We get musicians, storytellers, and artists to come to the center [to perform for the children]. Right now our highest priority is to get more volunteers.

I asked her why she did not approach the Peace Corps and ask them to assign volunteers to work with her. She replied that she did not feel the need to have more Americans working in the center. From the beginning she felt that a Senegalese could do what she was doing much more easily. She wanted to try out a model; now she is trying to encourage Senegalese to take over. But even though she is now unpaid, she observed that she would not go "without leaving proper structures."

Finding people to replace her is, however, a very slow and long process. As she pointed out, in West Africa children were brought up in the village setting without any specialized care; that is, they learned adult roles through imitation and no special training was required. Nowadays, with the changing values and radically different economic institutions, children are a "bit left out." They have no one to spend time with them when parents go to work away from the home. Unfortunately, the idea of investing one's life working with children outside the educational system is alien and many people are, as Molly put it, "reticent about working with children." There is little prestige associated with such a vocation.

Molly has found some people who would be willing to work as volunteers, but the center's lack of funds is inhibiting.

I don't have a car so I have to wait an hour to take a bus. You cannot take a taxi everywhere because it is just too expensive, so if I can get a grant, then we will get a car. If we have a car, we will be able to do many more things. I could even go pick people up to come. People here just do not have money. They would like to come but it is such a hassle. Whereas if you go and pick them up there is no problem.

The need for transportation also curtails efforts to collect materials in the rural areas. (Anyone who has had to rely on public transportation

in West Africa will appreciate the inconvenience, the discomfort, and hazards of riding in these vehicles.) One has to admire the sheer physical stamina Molly and Bollé have demonstrated taking the children and recording equipment around Senegal to collect the interviews for their radio broadcast.

Olivia and I were not the only foreign visitors to the center, and I wondered whether or not such visits were an interference. Molly told us.

One interesting thing is that [some of] these kids have had the experience of going to school and having people tell them what is good is French culture.... And all of a sudden they see foreigners [coming] here who are interested in their culture. They think it is really marvelous when they get up and dance and sing and everybody really enjoys it. And so I think that it is good [that you come] once in a while. People who come here ask me why as an American I am doing this work. Well, first of all I love it. And second, because I want to. Not because I am trying to save anyone or anything like that. I do it because I am learning so much from it. But also the kids, I think they really get a kick out of it. And have you noticed how they love it to have Wolof spoken here? They think that is just wonderful. And I think that psychologically, when they see foreigners care enough about their culture to take an active interest in it, that makes them rather more interested too. And when they see people come here, they liven up. They like to perform and when they see people come, they want to do theater.

Molly and I discussed the issue of difference in cultural values and how she, as an American, managed to cope with these. I related a discussion I had with a Western author of children's books who was shocked at the "terrible values" portrayed in African children's stories. Molly said,

Well, that was one of the first things that I came up against—my upbringing. Doing cultural studies here in Dakar helped me to adapt to these stories, realizing that you cannot compare anything in this culture with anything in American culture. This is a different system and there

are different priorities and different goals compared to those in the American system. If I came here and tried to impose my goals, which in America means succeeding in a material way, getting ahead, making progress, individualism, that type of thing, it would not work here...it would be a very negative thing to do.... I have learned so much from being here, different priorities which I feel are extremely important.... I would never want to change any. All I am trying to do is to use what there is. These stories have existed for centuries. People like them, read them, laugh at them. I would never be one to come in and say that [they're] teaching the wrong values to their children. But what I found is that in effect a lot of them are the same values, just put across in a different way.

Molly talked about courtesy. From an American point of view these children might not appear to be polite because one does not hear, for example, words like "please" and "thank you." However, politeness in children is extremely important in Senegal, it is simply expressed in a different way. One way is by greetings. Each little child upon entering the center came to Molly to shake her hand, then solemnly shook our hands and those of the children older than themselves.

Molly gave an illustration of how values appear in Senegalese stories by telling one of the most popular among the children.

It is about a little girl who laughs at people and mocks them. She comes to no good. In the end, this little girl is eaten by wild animals and a bird, which comes along, picks up her tongue, which is all that is left, and takes it to her parent's village and drops it in a pot of couscous which they are cooking in preparation for her arrival back home. A common theme throughout West African literature is of the one little girl who does what she is supposed to do, who is polite, who represents everything that you are supposed to be in society, and a second little girl who is loved by her mother, but does everything which is wrong. She is loved too much by her mother and is spoiled. This mother loves her because she is her own child, whereas the first little girl, who is

good, was the child of the first wife who has died. So there is a double moral; it teaches mothers that they should treat their children equally as well as showing children examples of good and bad behavior. Now the first thing which would shock the American is that there are two wives, and probably the second is that a child is eaten by wild animals. Although when you look at our own fairy tales, they are often full of worse things.

Molly talked about the different way the Senegalese look at ideas of honesty and love.

Honesty is important here, but it is seen in a different way. We can allow people to say almost anything so long as it is true. We admire that even though it may hurt somebody. We say "Well, at least he was honest." Here honesty is important, but keeping the peace in the community and getting along with people is of a higher priority. When you know that, then you know that very rarely will anyone tell you something that will hurt your feelings. More likely they will tell you a lie rather than hurt you. And that is what is seen as being good, because you are keeping the peace. You are maintaining social relations and therefore working to achieve the goals of society. There is even a proverb here that says a lie which builds is better than truth which destroys. People believe that very strongly and they will always view someone negatively who says something that may be honest, but that hurts someone else. They think that is awful.

Molly finds it necessary to explain such things to other Americans who are in Senegal and who are disturbed by the differences in values and behavior.

There are many things [which are different]. People come here and they say to me that Senegalese people are insensitive. One woman said that to me once and I asked her what made her say that. She said that she had seen an accident and that people were standing around laughing! I said that maybe she doesn't understand what laughter means here. People may laugh when they are sad about something. They will come in and tell me, "My father died last night," and laugh.

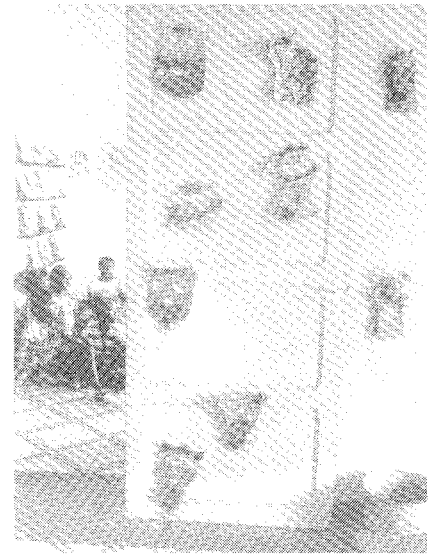
That is when I started realizing that laughter must mean something else. I can give numerous examples [of such differences]. I think that it all goes back to these basic priorities...if you always go back to them you will better understand [people's actions] because priorities are different here.... I think that anybody who works here, and wants to be effective in what he does has to keep that in mind constantly. We would expect [for example] someone to come to work every day and be here right on time. For us what is important is getting ahead in material terms and in order to do that you have to be on time. Here the priority is social relations. So if you have an obligation at home, or a holiday, or a festivity, that takes the priority because that is what the goal is, namely maintaining solid social relationships among people. I don't think it means you have to adopt these values if you don't want to, but you have to at least know them to be able to work here.

Bollé was asked if he didn't think it was rather ironic that it should be an American who is involved in teaching children about their own culture and language.

This is exactly why I want to try to get a grant to go and perfect myself. Molly does not impose herself, she does not pretend she is teaching them their own language. She does something for them. But we must not delude ourselves—Molly will go

back. Now someone is needed to take the lead. It is for this reason that Molly herself is always encouraging me to work more. She often tells me that my work is already good. She will have to go back and I know that the center must go on. She tells me that I must perpetuate it, because I don't do it for myself but for these children. I know that there are many other areas in which I could be better paid, but I tell myself that I must make sacrifices because the day will come when all the [financial] problems with which I am now confronted will only be memories. Already the responsibility which I have is sufficient and satisfying me very much. I will be fulfilled when one day in a few years I will meet an adult who was one of the children in this center. He will talk to me in the street and tell me, "I will never forget what I was doing with you at the center." What is unfortunate here in Senegal is that people have the tendency to value diplomas. The worth of a man is not great when it is known that this man does not have many diplomas. But diplomas, what are they compared to the talents of a human being? But the way things are here [they] must not be neglected. For me to go on with the work at the center I still need to learn audio-visual [techniques] because [the media] are very important in extending the work.

Both Molly and Bollé have intuitively resolved many of the problems that



often cause the failure of the many so-called development projects in Africa. Their project, designed to employ and enhance the values and resources of the people, developed in response to a need Senegal recognized. The costs have been so minimal there is hope for its survival. Perhaps most important, the humility Molly has manifested from the outset has allowed those Senegalese with whom she worked to realize their own capacities to carry on a program in which they too have invested so much.

(October 1980)