

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-1

Uncle Joe's Guest House
2A Cameron Street
P.O. Box 319
Banjul, The Gambia
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Africa Revisited

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, N.H.

Dear Peter,

Uncle Joe's Guest House and Bar is a white stucco building on the corner of Cameron and Dobson streets in the heart of Banjul. Its pale blue door stays closed until about noon, when it opens to reveal multi-colored plastic streamers well suited to let in the cool breeze off the Atlantic but keep out the tropical sun. The rippling red, yellow, green and orange strips invite the hot and thirsty passer-by to come in for a drink and a rest.

Also to attract customers, at midday the four-foot speakers on either side of the door begin to shake the building with blasts of African rock, Caribbean reggae or black American soul à la Isaac Hayes. For a while the blaring record player competes for the outsiders' attention with the high-pitched voices of children in the nearby primary school gleefully reciting lessons in unison, but classes let out at two and for the rest of the afternoon the pulsing beat of bar music pervades the dusty air of the street unchallenged.

Behind the small barroom are the living quarters of Uncle Joe and his many nephews and nieces. He is a rotund black man, his girth about four feet at its fullest, with black-rimmed glasses, a sparse, graying mustache and a proper British accent. At the back of his building is the small apartment which I now call home. The bedroom is cluttered with furniture and electrical apparatus. Wires hang from the leaf-green walls like vines, from which switches and outlets bulge like vegetal excrescences. Most of the switches produce some light, but neither the fan nor the air conditioner works. Off of the bedroom is a dim and dank lavatory with cold-water shower, sink and toilet.

The backdoor leads to a small enclosed yard of hard-packed dirt where Joe's women cook on charcoal fires and do the laundry in plastic pails. A corrugated-metal shed is marked Men and Women in white paint, but most of Joe's customers relieve themselves on the side of the street or in a vacant lot or side alley.

Bowden Quinn is an Institute Fellow studying colonial influences on West African nations. He was a reporter for three years for the Journal Inquirer in Manchester, Conn., and, before that, was a Peace Corps volunteer in Chad.

During the day the street is painfully bright. Banjul, a city of about 40,000 and capital of The Gambia, was built on a sand spit which supports little vegetation. Most of the downtown streets are unshaded, unlike similar towns in Chad where the French lined the roads with towering trees. In some of those towns, unfortunately, resentful Chadian officials had the trees cut down after independence because they weren't fruit-bearing and so were considered a useless vestige of colonialism. More productive arbors never replaced the fallen trees, however.

Banjul does not need the shade as much as unbaked Chad because of the breeze off the ocean, which, on these winter evenings, gains strength and gets quite cool. A visitor from New England finds it refreshing, but the poorer Gambians, especially the children in short pants and thin cotton shirts, shiver in the wind.

The most noticeable difference between Banjul and the towns in Chad is the traffic. In Chad, most of the cars were gray Land-Rovers and gray Peugeot 404s. Here the streets are full of Japanese and European compacts, brightly colored, making walking hazardous for the multitude of pedestrians crowding the sandy sidewalks and crisscrossing the roads. The contrast between the well-dressed blacks behind the wheel and the ragged Africans on the street is a constant reminder of the difficulties facing dependent countries like The Gambia. There is not enough money to go around, so while some Gambians enjoy the wealth and privileges of independence, most live as poorly as they did under the colonialists, in cramped shelters with too little to eat, too little to wear, too little to do. Indeed, independence made their lives harder as profligate spending by their more fortunate countrymen drives up the cost of everything.

I was walking in an area where some of these poorer Gambians live, the air rank with the smell of raw sewage running in open troughs in the street and stifling even in the winter sun from the reflected heat of metal, concrete and painted wood, these people not having the luxury of cool mud for their homes, when school let out. Immediately the streets were full of children in colorful uniforms. The boldest practiced their English on me: "Hello. How are you? Give me a pen. Give me two pennies." For the majority of them, who won't make it into secondary school and so will be shut off from most paying jobs, that is the only English which will be of much use. Meanwhile, through the crowd black Mercedes and other expensive cars worked their way carrying uniformed children just like those in the street, except their parents are government officials and wealthy businessmen who live in big houses with green yards in Sere Kunda, six miles from here.

"Colonies do not cease to be colonies because they are independent."

When Benjamin Disraeli spoke those words in 1863 he was talking about the United States, then in the midst of civil war. He told his fellow members of the House of Commons that the American Revolution, begun almost 100 years before, would not conclude until the end of that civil war. "Great revolutions," he said, "whatever may be their causes, are not lightly commenced and are not concluded with precipitation." Only when the war was over would the United States' colonial status cease,

"and those imperial characteristics appear which seem to be the destiny of man," he maintained.

The speech is less noteworthy for its prognostication than its parallels with later sentiments expressed in the very country whose change of course he predicted. He warned against becoming involved in the American war and condemned the British government's interference in other countries' affairs, particularly in China where it had previously supported rebels against the emperor but changed policy to support that ruler against "the Taeping insurrection". This led Disraeli to demand: "Who are the Taepings? What are the Taepings? Sir, I maintain that we have nothing to do with the Taepings. Whether they are patriots or whether they are brigands is nothing to the people of England." In a different chamber, in a different century, this might have been said of another band of rebels in another Asian country.

The problem with the likes of McCarthy and McGovern, however, was they were not content with indifference, but felt compelled to insist the American involvement in Vietnam was not only unwise but immoral. Disraeli's practicality may be one reason the two-time prime minister had a more successful career than his American imitators. He knew that the fundamental concerns were, as they still are, money and power. A sure formula for success in political life remains the ability to hold down taxes while holding high the flag.

"I ventured last year..." Disraeli reminded his colleagues, "to call the attention of the House to our expenditure. We were then told retrenchment was impossible, because if we retrenched we should be subservient to France." Yesterday Britain and France, today the U.S. and Russia, but the argument remains the same. If he were in Congress today, Disraeli might direct the same words to Jimmy Carter as he did in 1863 to Viscount Palmerston:

"Let it not be supposed that because we advocate a frugal and economical administration of the public funds we are opposed to an efficient state of the public service or the maintenance of those establishments abroad which are necessary to maintain our position."

Could George Bush say it any better?

Will the arguments be the same, the men and countries different, a hundred years from now? Will a representative from The Gambia stand up in the legislative chamber of the United Federation of West African States and counsel discretion in regards to the civil war in India and suggest that the threat from Brazil does not warrant an increase in taxes? African leaders certainly talk often enough about the need for unity. Pan-Africanism was a much praised ideal before most countries on this continent had their independence. Reason supports this approach. How much better off African states would be if each wasn't compelled to have its own army, its own currency, its own airline, its own brewery. Yet there are substantial obstacles. Unlike the American colonists, West Africans don't have a common language and shared political traditions. In The Gambia, a sliver of a country four-fifths the size of Connecticut, there are nine major tribes. It is difficult enough for these small countries to

command the loyalty of their citizens; federation would only compound the problem. Attempts at forming multi-state nations have failed here. The federation of Senegal and Mali, formed before independence in 1960, broke apart in two months. The Gambia, which, except for its coastline, is enveloped by Senegal, a country 19 times larger, has resisted plans for unification, although it is still discussed. The major impediment to such consolidations up to now has been the reluctance of government leaders to give up power.

However, it may be that history is not about to repeat itself. As we near the end of the millennium, conditions seem right for a change in the direction of human events. The sweep of different peoples across the face of the earth has ended. Invading armies now occupy, they do not conquer. The tempering effect of large-scale immigration diminishes as nations, worried about maintaining their way of life, restrict the entry of other peoples. And, for the first time, the finite capacities of the earth, in land, food, resources, water and even air, have been felt.

If a new chapter in the history of humanity is about to begin, it will not necessarily appear here first. One of the most frustrating characteristics of the new African nations is that they seem determined to repeat the mistakes of older countries. It seems to me, however, that the stark contrast between rich and poor here cannot continue forever. The African nations, recognizing the truth behind Disraeli's comment on colonies, blame the developed nations and call for a new economic order, but even a newly arrived observer can see that their own houses are in disarray.

At the Fourth International Congress of African Studies, held December 1978 in Zaire, scholars discussed "The Dependency of Africa and the Remedies". As reviewed by Barbara Harrell-Bond in her AUPS* report 1979/No. 31, the group discussed dependency in economic, cultural, military and political terms. For purposes of organization I have taken these categories, but prefer to join the political and military fields under the heading of government and add education to the list.

It is with education that I will begin, and have chosen The Gambia and neighboring Senegal because they have enjoyed a large degree of political stability since independence, allowing the school systems to develop unhindered by abrupt changes in leadership. Africans generally consider 1960 as the year which marks their rebirth as a free people. The largest number of African nations achieved their independence, like Senegal, in that year. The Gambia was a bit tardy, becoming a new state in 1965. Still, both countries have reached a point where positions of leadership will start being assumed by young men and women who have been educated entirely as free Gambians and Senegalese. To determine how Africa will evolve in the next 20 years it is important to know the educational system that shaped these new leaders and how they now plan to change that system for the next generation of Africans.

Sincerely,



Bowden Quinn