

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-10

My Little Brother

P.O. Box 319  
Banjul, The Gambia  
July 4, 1980Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
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Dear Peter,

My friend Karamo was in high spirits before we left for Ziguinchor. He had just won an essay contest sponsored by a local movie theater. He told me of the announcement of the winners over the radio. The contest organizers said two entries were so much better than the rest it was hard to choose between them. Karamo, a gangly boy who figures he's about 19 years old, laughed. He had written both essays, but, worried that the judges wouldn't award two prizes to one person, he had put his girlfriend's name on one. It received the second prize; Karamo said he had made a few intentional errors on it to avoid arousing the judges' suspicions.

I smiled. As much as I admire Karamo's writing talent, his English is a long way from perfect. One of his most noticeable weaknesses is a tendency to interchange male and female pronouns because no such distinction is made in Mandinka, his native tongue. This makes it difficult to follow him when he's telling a story involving people of both sexes. I wondered what kind of intentional errors he could have made on his pseudonymous essay.

I was not in as good a mood as my young friend, however. I had wanted to leave that day, Saturday, for Sintet, Karamo's village, but when I looked for Karamo in his uncle's compound in Banjul I was told he had gone out of town that morning. I was steaming, inside and out, as I trudged back to my room on that hot afternoon with my backpack. Karamo showed up a few minutes later, but he hadn't even packed his bag yet. I told him to be at the taxi park the next morning at eight or I'd leave without him.

I had been looking forward to spending a couple days in Sintet, a good-sized village of more than 1,000 inhabitants, just off The Gambia's main road. I had become intrigued by the place from reading Karamo's stories about growing up there. An excerpt, with corrected grammar, from one story will, I hope, show the reason for my interest as well as for my admiration of his writing:

"In the middle of my village, Sintet, stands a "tabo" tree. Its age is unknown, nor does anyone care to know. It is tall and large. Its branches spread over the huge trunk as an um-

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brella shades an old man in midsummer. Under the tree is a large square platform made of bamboo reeds and held by forked poles. The place is called "Bantaba" and it is where the villagers gather to rest or discuss important matters.

"The tree also is an idol for the disciples of Nyamo, the god of the Jolas in my village. Whenever the village is threatened, by fire, famine, disease, or the like, the Jola women pull their lappas up to their knees and, in a crowd, drumming, shouting, crying, laughing, singing, clapping, come to the "tabo" tree with palm wine, a goat and a cooking pot. Some go naked as they dance before their god, Nyamo. I would stand with the other boys and some curious Muslim women, watching them from a safe distance."

Anxious to be in Ziguinchor on Monday to visit schools, I decided to put off the visit to Sintet until our return. Besides, there was an aspect to the visit that I wasn't looking forward to. The last time I went to Karamo's home, his father, taking advantage of his son's absence and the presence of someone else to act as interpreter, made a pitiable plea that I not take Karamo with me when I left The Gambia for good. The father explained that he was old and poor and had no one else to support him.

I felt like a hypocrite as I assured the old man I had no intention of taking his son away, for I knew of Karamo's desire to study abroad and I had provided him with the addresses of some U.S. schools. I felt it would be a waste if this bright young man should be unable to continue his education. I sympathized with him as he talked about the trap of getting a job after graduating from high school, at 180 dalasis, or about \$104, a month. With a job, he would become a target for appeals for money from poor relatives, and in the resulting struggle between his feelings of obligation to his family and his desire for a better life for himself, his hopes of studying overseas could fade away. Yet I also felt sorry for the old man. He was once a wealthy trader, but his back was broken when a granary fell on him. Now, the poorest man in the village, he hobbles about doubled over, like an old, crippled dog, and spends most of the day sitting hunched in the shade of an orange tree in the middle of his small compound.

Karamo's unsuccessful attempts to get scholarship aid from a U.S. school had just been made more painful by a nasty cut from fate's sharp edge of irony. He had helped out a schoolmate by preparing an application to a prep school in Virginia for him. He didn't think his friend, a mediocre student, had much chance of success. The boy didn't take much interest in the application, failing to comply with one of the school's requirements and delaying the fulfillment of another until Karamo had to draft a letter of apology for him. Both boys were surprised when the applicant not only was accepted but received a scholarship, unrequested and unneeded for his father is one of the richest men in the country.

The failure of the Gambian government to provide scholarship money for its students not only makes it harder for Gambian youngsters to get a college education but deprives the government of a chance to promote the development of skilled

manpower in areas of critical need. Gambia College, the only institution of higher education in this country, is a feeble establishment turning out badly prepared teachers, nurses, public health workers and agriculture specialists. The lack of government scholarship aid increases the insularity of those in the upper class, who can afford to send their children to a foreign university. The better-educated sons and daughters of the wealthy get most of the good-paying jobs, giving rise to a self-perpetuating elite.

These weren't the problems I was thinking about as I traveled to the Casamance. The end-of-year exams had begun in Senegal and I was eager to see what would become of the SUDES strike described in my last letter. I also wanted to look at primary schools and find out more about adult education in Senegal. I had invited Karamo along as guide, interpreter and companion. He had taken his final exams, given to all high school graduates in the former British West African countries of The Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, but would have to wait until September for the results.

It was in Kolda, a town 125 miles northeast of Ziguinchor, that my interests began to drift from the drama in the Senegalese schools to that going on beside me. We were staying with a friend of some youths Karamo had met in Ziguinchor, and the open-armed way we were welcomed into the home impressed me. On the first night of our stay, the friend's aged mother came into the bedroom where the three of us were sitting. Karamo invited her to sit on the bed but she preferred to squat on a small stool by the door, and from this lowered position she made a long speech, which Karamo translated for me:

"She said how happy she is that we have come to her home. She said it is an honor because we have come all this way from The Gambia only in the hope of being received here as guests. She is only sorry that she cannot do more for us, but her husband is not working and her son is not working and there is no money. But she said we are to treat this home as our home and to consider her as our mother. Even as we consider our own mothers at home, so we are to consider her, too, as our mother."

The next day at lunch I told Karamo that the necessity of staying in Ziguinchor until the following Monday to see how the college exams came off would prevent my stopping in Sintet on the way home. He understood, but said he would be getting out at Sintet to ask for his father's blessing before he began looking for a job. This came as a surprise to me after the fierce determination to continue his education that he had shown before. When I asked him about the change of heart, he told me how things had gotten worse for his father. The old man's other two sons had broken with their father some time ago, and now his wife had announced that she would go to live with one of her sons for the rainy season. The father said he would rather die than live with an ungrateful son. Karamo's mother, the old man's second wife, died many years ago, so the father has no one but Karamo to depend on.

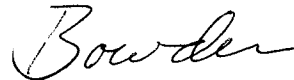
In this humble family tragedy there is all the pathos of King Lear, and the SUDES strike became a comic interlude for me. The union called off its threatened exam boycott two weeks ago, but later the teachers said they would give only passing grades,

an obvious attempt to change the hostility of parents and students over the prospect of canceled exams into support for the teachers' demands. The director at the Ziguinchor college I visited merely forbade the SUDES teachers to correct exams, and although this would cause a slight delay in announcing the results, which usually come the day after the tests are given, there was no disruption of the exam process as I had anticipated.

I returned to The Gambia before this humorous test of wills had ended. I haven't found out what the government's reaction to the SUDES protest has been, but I feel it will only be part of a continuing struggle, and I will be long gone from this area before the last pie is thrown.

The drama of Karamo's future also has a long time to run, but I hope to retain a part in it. Some months ago, as a sign of respect, Karamo began calling me kordoké, or big brother, and I in turn call him ndoké, little brother. In traditional African society, an older brother commands the obedience of his junior, while the younger brother can count on his elder's aid. He needs only to ask to receive. The penetration of Western economies has spread Western selfishness. The old bonds are tearing; Karamo's half-brothers are only two of several **successful sons I have heard about** who have rejected their fathers. Nothing can be more precious, however, than the kindness and the kinship of human beings, as I learned when a poor old African lady took me into her home and made me her son.

Best regards,



Bowden Quinn